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GOLD-DUST DAN.

THE TRAIL PATROL



OR,

WIPING OUT OLD NICK'S NINE.

A Romance of Montana Camps and Trails.

BY JOHN W. OSBON.

AUTHOR OF "BOLLY DORRIT, THE VETERAN
DETECTIVE," "PLUCKY PAUL, THE BOY
PROSPECTOR," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

GOLD-DUST DAN.

"By heavens! those men are the Mountain League, and they are lying in wait for the stage coming up from Sand Bar! Gold-Dust Dan, you're in luck!"

Not loudly but with a deal of energy, the words burst from the lips of a youth kneeling, rifle in hand, upon the brink of a bold precipice

"BY HEAVENS! THOSE MEN ARE THE MOUNTAIN LEAGUE AND THEY ARE LYING IN
WAIT FOR THE STAGE! GOLD-DUST DAN, YOU'RE IN LUCK!"

overhanging a stage trail, several hundred feet below.

There, crouching behind bowlders and hidden in the undergrowth bordering the trail, were the men referred to, nine in number, all masked and heavily armed.

To eyes far less experienced than Gold-Dust Dan's, it would have been plainly evident that the cohort meant mischief.

With a last lingering glance, as if seeking to fix every detail of the ambush in mind, the youth drew back from the verge and rose to his feet, his dark eyes aglow, his lips parted, disclosing his gleaming white teeth in a smile peculiarly tigerish.

Tall, finely proportioned, with the torso of an athlete, this mountain nomad was a handsome lad. His hair and his eyes were dark, almost black, and his clear-cut features wore the ruddy glow of perfect health. He was fully armed, carrying a fine repeating-rifle, a brace of heavy revolvers and an eight-inch bowie.

His outer garments were of dark corduroy, and showed traces of rough usage. A gay silken tie fluttered at his throat, streaming airily from 'neath the wide collar of his blue flannel shirt. A sombrero covered his head, high-topped cavalry boots his feet.

"Yes, it is the Mountain League, or Old Nick's Nire, and the knavish crew are lying in wait for the stage," he repeated, as he gained his feet and gazed anxiously down the trail. "If Jehu Johnny isn't warned, he will drive straight into the trap, too."

If it was the youth's intention to warn the driver of the stage, little time was to be lost. The sun was less than two hours above the western horizon, while the stage was due at Slocum City, a good five miles to the northward, a trifle before nightfall.

Whatever may have been the determination of Gold-Dust Dan, no word of his betrayed it. Leisurely enough, he picked his way around a jutting angle, and thence to the bottom of a narrow ravine or fissure leading down into one of the numerous canyons piercing the range.

A good half-mile at that seemingly slow pace, then a sharp turn in the ravine revealed a clean-limbed black horse tethered in a sheltered niche, and which, a moment later, the young nomad mounted.

Then followed a series of startling events.

Into view from the cover of a heap of rocks glided a man—a tall, gaunt, disreputable-looking desperado, with gleaming, furtive gray eyes, a bushy, yellow beard, and a shock of reddish-brown hair.

This man held a cocked revolver in his right hand, and the muzzle of the weapon covered the young rider.

"Raise yer leetle hands, me lark," called out the desperado. "I hes caught ye dead ter rights, an' I reckon ye'll git a full dose ov hoss-thief's medicine, dern ye!"

Reluctantly enough, Gold-Dust Dan obeyed.

The ruffian had secured the "drop," and a glance at his ugly face showed that he was ripe for any devilry if crossed.

"Up they go!" returned the boy named, smiling grimly.

"Now git off my hoss."

"Your horse?"

"I hes sed et, kid—my hoss!"

"Go to, thou attenuated fraud!" and Dan laughed derisively. "Your horse, indeed! I'll see you hanged first!"

"Light, or I'll help ye! Ye're kivered!"

"An' so be you, Sargeant Sly!"

At that low, intense voice, both actors in the scene started and cast a swift glance upward.

There, not four feet above, Gold-Dust Dan, extended at full length in a niche in the side of the ravine, just his arms and a portion of his weather-beaten face visible, lay the speaker, each of his brawny hands grasping a huge revolver, both of which bore full upon the head of the yellow-bearded desperado.

"Pards, I passes!" ejaculated the latter, though his eyes gleamed wickedly as they encountered the face of the man on the rock. "Es fer you, Ozark Oil—reckon I kin find a time ter settle with ye fer mixin' in this day!" and with a vicious little nod Sargeant Sly slipped out of sight around the rocks as adroitly as he had appeared.

"My friend, I owe you one," Gold-Dust Dan exclaimed, gazing keenly at the face of his deliverer. "That rascal had me dead to rights. I might have succeeded in getting in a snap-shot, but the chances are big that he would have spitted me at the same time."

"Wal, I reckon ye ain't got no cause ter kick, kid, beka'se I mixed in," observed the man on the rock, as he arose and stretched his

cramped limbs. "I'll be gol-swinged ef et wa'n't a putty nice leetle game, thet ov ther sargeant's, on'y et's so bold fer him thet I'm afeard thar's more ov his ilk in ther bresh," and he narrowly surveyed his surroundings, just a trace of anxiety betraying itself in his keen glance.

"I hope not, just now, though at almost any other time I would be glad to see the scoundrels show their hands," Dan returned. "May I ask how you happened in so opportunely?"

"Follered Sargeant Sly till I got onto his leetle game, an' jest went him one better. But w'at's rushin' ye, boy? I kin see ye're jest itchin' ter tech spurs ter yer critter."

"I've got business down the trail, pardner. If you will slip over the ridge, you'll see some fun when the hearse comes by. Keep your eyes open for an ambush!"

The last sentence came back in cautious strains as Gold-Dust Dan dashed away at a breakneck pace.

"Old Nick's Nine," I'll bet a kiote!" muttered Ozark Oil, his sharp glance following the rapidly-disappearing youth. "An' I'll putt up even ag'in' all ther whisky in Montana thet thet kid's Gold-Dust Dan! Hang et! I does hope ther sargeant an' his b'illin' don't ambush him! I've took a powerful fancy ter thet owdashus young cherub!"

Tall, gaunt, angular, the old mountain-man presented a striking appearance as he leaned upon his rifle at the edge of the narrow terrace.

His age was not short of fifty years. His face was seamed and wrinkled, and bore many a scar, while his long hair and beard were rapidly whitening under the frost of time; but his keen blue eyes were as piercing, as far-reaching, as ever, while every movement showed undiminished agility and muscularity.

Of Indian make was his buckskin garb, beaded and quilted after the manner so dear to the red-skin dandy of the far frontier. Stout moccasins covered his feet, and a black sombrero his head, a miniature bowie looping up one side of the broad brim.

Ozark Oil was a recent arrival at Slocum City, having appeared there less than a week prior to the afternoon of which I write. He had proclaimed himself a prospector; and, as he carried the necessary kit of tools, there had been none to dispute his claim, although many doubted it.

"Goslin's! but thet kid do ride!" he ejaculated, turning away, as Gold-Dust Dan swept around a distant angle of the canyon. "Thar's sum'-thin' rank in ther air, an' I'll jest mosey over ter ther trail an' take er peek, as he hinted."

Cautiously the old mountain-man made his way along the terrace, presently gaining a point from which he found an ascent to the upper heights an easy task, and soon was snugly ensconced in a small thicket bordering the brow of the precipice.

The trail lay almost directly beneath him, and after a moment's keen scrutiny, he detected the ambush.

"They're waitin' fer ther hearse. They must be Old Nick's Nine!" Ozark muttered, his blue eyes darkening wrathfully. "I unnerstand now. Ther kid's after puttin' Jehu Johnny Morgan up ter ther racket. Think I'll take a hand myself when ther cirks opens; ther Nine's in A1 range ov Betsy Longreach," and he hastened to assure himself that his handsome repeating-rifle was in first-class working order.

Not long had Ozark Oil to wait.

Ten—fifteen minutes went by, and the shadows lengthened rapidly along the foot of the precipice. Then came the rumble of wheels, and, a moment later, the stage swung into view around a slight bend fifty yards down the trail, the Jehu plying whip, the four horses straining every muscle.

Forth from his covert strode the chief of the outlaw cohort, a revolver in each hand, a stern hail pealing from his lips.

Slowly, deliberately, Ozark Oil brought his rifle to his shoulder.

"Down ye go, devil! Death—"

A heavy blow cut the sentence short, and, with a low moan, the mountain-man fell forward upon his face, senseless.

Old Nick's Nine had not left their rear unguarded!

CHAPTER II.

THE MASKED HORSEMAN.

"ALL aboard, feller-citizens, fer Slocum City!"

Thus cried Johnny Morgan, the Jehu, as he nimbly mounted to the box, at the relay station midway between Sand Bar and Slocum City.

The genial Johnny was in something of a

hurry. The station-keeper only a moment before had drawn him aside and whispered a few sentences of a nature anything but pleasant.

Word had come down from the upper trail to the effect that a party of suspicious-looking armed men were encamped at a secluded spot, evidently awaiting the arrival of the stage.

"Big Davy Brinkman, dhe hunter, brung in dhe wor-rud, an' et's Big Davy yez can depind upon!" averred the station boss, Micky Boyle, in conclusion. "Faith! et's yer eyes yez want ter kape open, me b'boy, for Oi've a moind et's dhat bloody Ould Nick's Noine ag'in, be-gob!"

Johnny nodded grimly, his glance following his passengers, a lady and three men, who were just then relieving their cramped limbs by strolling about the station; his thin, sharp-featured visage grew dark and lowering, his sinewy hands clinched, his black eyes sparkled viciously.

"Old Nick's Nine!" he gritted, with a bitter imprecation. "Wal, I'm sorry they've turned up this trip," and he nodded shortly in the direction of the lady. "The colonel's gal, Micky Boyle, an' I don't reckon Slocum City'll hold him ef anything happens her."

"Throw a pound or two ov slugs inter yer double-barrel shotgun, Micky, an' let me hev et. Ef them cusses will hunt trouble, dang 'em! they'll find a row ter hoe!"

"Dhat's dhe talk!—ef et wasn't jist fer dhe gurl!" assented Micky, and then he darted away to secure the gun.

Jehu Johnny Morgan strode straight up to his passengers.

"Thar's bad news from up-trail, my friends," he declared, bluntly. "Ther boss hyer tells me he has reason ter think thar's a gang ov road-agents lyin' in wait fer us 'tween hyer an' Slocum City."

"Road-agents!" ejaculated the four passengers in a breath, and the oldest of the party, a portly, smooth-faced, middle-aged fellow, well dressed and wearing spectacles, lifted up his plump white hands and uttered a groan of dismay.

"I do wish I had stuck to the ministry!" he gurgled, turning an ashen face to the Jehu. "I think you, my g-good fellow, that they'll b-b-butcher us?"

"I hopes not," returned Johnny Morgan, crustily. He had taken a dislike to his fleshy passenger, who, by the way, was entered upon the stage-company's book as the Rev. Uriah Smoothly, of St. Louis. "I hopes thar's a mistake in ther report."

"But what I wants ter know is, who among ye aire willin' ter risk pullin' through? Make up yer minds quick, fer ther hosses aire ready, an' I start in jest two minutes. With danger along ther trail, I want ter travel by daylight."

"I am going through to Slocum City," promptly avowed the lady passenger, a lovely blue-eyed girl of seventeen. "Papa is not expecting me, but I have not seen him in a long time, and will avoid all the delay I possibly can."

"I goes through, too, pard."

"And I."

Thus, in a breath, spoke up two others of the passengers, heavily-bearded, well-armed young fellows, evidently miners, who had gotten on at Sand Bar.

"I—I must reach Slocum City to-day!" groaned Rev. Smoothly, wringing his hands. "Oh, Lord! if I had never invested in that mine!"

"All right, then—et's settled, an well see what we kin do," declared Johnny Morgan, and he nimbly mounted to his seat, with the cry opening this chapter.

"If you please, Mr. Morgan, I should like to ride up there with you."

At almost any other time Jehu Johnny would have hailed this request with some show of delight. Just now, however—

His gaze met the pleading blue eyes of the golden-haired beauty, and his curt refusal died in his throat.

"Sart'in, Miss Moulton—sart'in!" he returned, in confusion, as he descended from his perch. "That is, till we reach ther danger line. Arter thet, ye must ride inside."

"Very well," assented the young lady, and the next minute she was on the driver's seat.

At that juncture, Micky Boyle came running up with his gun.

"Heur's dhe weeping, Johnny, dear, an' b'cess to dhem as sthand befoore et!" he cried with a flourish. "Take et an' be off wid y Good luck an' a safe thrip!"

Then the Jehu's whip cracked merrily, and the stage rolled rapidly away from the station, fol-

lowed as long as it was in sight by the anxious eyes of Micky Boyle.

"Purty es an angel, begobs! an' that, too, wid dhe very divil fer a sire!" he muttered, shaking his head ruefully as he turned and walked back to his quarters.

And Johnny Morgan was thinking much the same thing.

The first hour of the run to Slocum City passed most agreeably to the Jehu. Miss Moulton was all life and animation, talked most charmingly, and listened with deep interest to his tales of frontier life.

"I am glad I determined to come on," remarked Miss Moulton, after a brief silence, with a shy side-glance at Johnny Morgan's grave face. "It would have been intolerably dull at the station. I so dislike waiting for a train, or a boat, or a stage, when traveling, and just now I am particularly anxious to reach Colonel Moulton."

"Do you know him, Mr. Morgan?"

"The colonel—Colonel Sandy?—bless me, yes! Everybody in Slocum City knows the colonel—indeed, I may say everybody 'long this hyer line. He is one ov ther solid men ov this region, ther colonel is?"

The driver seemed to speak frankly enough; but, could Miss Winnie Moulton have looked into his averted eyes, she would have detected an expression anything but reassuring.

It was a subject distasteful to Johnny Morgan. He knew far more of the colonel than he cared to tell to this artless creature beside him. He knew that the colonel owned the best mine in the district, and knew, too, that he had acquired it through methods not above question. He knew that the colonel ran a gambling hell, played recklessly, drank heavily, and possessed a most vicious temper.

"Ef her pore heart's got ter be broke, et's not me that'll hev a hand in ther bitter-black work!" he mused. "She'll open her eyes ter ther colonel's cussedness soon enuff, 'thout my tellin' et."

Then, after a long silence, broken only by an occasional question and reply:

"Ye've never bin ter Slocum City, Miss Moulton?"

"Never, Mr. Morgan; but I believe I have a pretty fair idea of what the camp is like," Winnie Moulton replied. "You see, I was compelled to remain three days in Sand Bar waiting for the stage, and of course heard a great deal about the boom on the upper trail."

"I understand there was a heavy burglary committed there a short time ago."

"Indeed thar was, miss," and here the Jehu manifested keener interest. "Great Jones, ov ther Great Jones Mine, was robbed ov nigh onto \$20,000 in good hard cash."

"And the thieves?"

"Ob, Lor, miss! they've made themselves sca'ce, though a reward ov hafe fer ther recovery ov ther money brung a dozen detectives inter camp. A good many people thinks Old Nick's Nine collared the scads."

"The road-agents?"

"Edzactly. I don't agree with 'em, though. It kinder strikes me one man got ther bundle, an' I'll bet a hoss I c'd putt my finger on ther—"

Johnny Morgan checked himself in some confusion, and abruptly drew rein.

"Hyar we aire, 'way over ther line, an' me a-wheelin' ye straight inter danger!" he exclaimed, dropping to the ground. "Come, Miss Moulton, I'll hev ter ask ye ter ride inside."

Miss Winnie offered no demur, much as she would have liked to retain her seat, but quietly thanked the driver and entered the coach.

The interruption was but momentary, and Johnny Morgan breathed a sigh of relief as he swung himself to the top of the stage and settled snugly into his seat.

"Thar! my tongue won't run away with me this trip!" he muttered, rather disconsolately. "Jingoes! but she's a corker! Ha'r like gold spun out; an' then, her eyes!—don't know when I've seen sich like! Heigho! I believe I'm clean gone! Won'er what the colonel would say ef—"

A burning flush suffused Jehu Johnny's bronzed face, and he sent his whip-lash cracking spitefully about the ears of the wheel-horses.

"Don't be a fool, Johnny Morgan!" he laughed, with forced lightness. "Such a girl as that care for you, you ruffian! Truly you're losing your head!"

And yet, this driver was a handsome man—a splendid-looking fellow. He stood full six feet in his patent-leather boots, with a wonderful breadth of shoulder and depth of chest, and was rated the equal in strength of any two men in

Slocum City. His hair, mustache and eyes were all of jetty hue, the latter deep-set and piercing.

That he was deeply excited his momentary dropping of the vernacular attested; for, of all the men who knew the Jehu as "Johnny Morgan," it is safe to say not one had ever detected such a lapse.

On and on the stage bowled, covering mile after mile. The way grew rougher and wilder. The most dangerous portion of the trail was at hand.

Then, at the mouth of a yawning canyon, Johnny Morgan sharply drew rein, a terse ejaculation accompanying the action.

A flash of crimson—the sharp waving of a plain silk 'kerchief—had met his eye, and he knew that it portended danger.

"Ther signal!" he muttered, springing to the ground and flinging open the stage door.

"Sorry ter 'sturb ye, lady; an' you, gents, but thar's danger ahead—"

"What is it—road-agent?" interjected the Rev. Smoothly, in a quiver of nervous excitement.

"Road-agents!" was the cool reply. "An', gents, ef ye're averse ter takin' yer choice av fightin' or bein' robbed, pile out. Thar's a snug nook close et hand, big enough ter hold ther hull av ye till I kin throw them galoots off an' come back. What say?"

"Verily, I shall avoid the sanguinary wretches!" the Rev. Uriah Smoothly declared, and he quitted the coach with all haste.

"An' I'll stay behind an' help take keer ov ther young leddy," promptly spoke one of the two miners.

"I'll stay by you, pard driver, an' see ye through," vowed the other, his bearded lips curling significantly.

"If you please, Mr. Morgan, I would prefer to remain in the stage," Miss Moulton said.

But, this did not suit Jehu Johnny, and he shook his head, saying:

"Indeed, ye must not, Miss Moulton. Your father'd never fergive me ef ye should stop an outlaw bullet, an'—an' I'd never fergive myself, nuther. Thar's quite likely ter be some shootin' ahead yender, an' ye'll be perfectly safe back hyar."

"Yes, young lady, you'll be safe with us," averred the Rev. Smoothly, making a valiant display of a pistol-butt. "I am not a man of war, but innocence never lacked a defender when Uriah Smoothly was at hand."

So Winnie Moulton yielded and quitted the stage.

"Ye must all keep under kiver an' make no noise," Johnny Morgan cautioned, as he led the way into the canyon. "Et may be an hour afore I git back—mebbe longer; but ef night comes without me, make yer way back ter ther trail an' start fer Slocum."

As he finished speaking, he thrust apart a mass of clinging vines, disclosing a small dry cavern, amply large to shelter the party, and when they had entered he carefully rearranged the foliage and hastened back to the stage!

"Now fer et, pard," he cried, cheerily, to the miner. "You take ther inside an' be ready fer biz. When ye shoot, kill! Old Nick's Nine must be wiped out, an' driven from this trail!"

The miner uttered a grim assent. Johnny Morgan climbed into his seat and urged the horses onward.

Now that he had been definitely warned of danger, the Jehu knew almost exactly where to look for it, and governed himself accordingly.

A half-mile further on was a bend in the trail, just beyond which was an admirable place for an ambushade.

As he neared this bend, Johnny Morgan passed the lines around his body, laid whip to his horses and sat calmly waiting, a cocked revolver in each hand.

Around the bend dashed the splendid team, dragging the coach at a furious pace, and then into plain view sprung a man, his face hidden behind a mask, his weapons raised.

"Halt, Jehu!" he cried, his voice singing out sharply. "I have business with you!"

Never another word was he to utter.

The revolver in Johnny Morgan's good right hand cracked spitefully, and the road-agent dropped in his tracks, shot squarely between the eyes.

Had that fatal snap-shot been a preconcerted signal of the outlaw cohort, they could not have acted more promptly or in closer unison. Up from the shelter of rock and bush they rose, yelling and cursing, while their ready revolvers sent a rain of lead around the gallant Jehu.

To the right and to the left fired Johnny Morgan, who sat in his seat unscathed, a defiant

yell pealing from his lips. Nor was the miner inside the stage idle. At the first fire, he had flung open the door, and was now emptying his revolvers with deadly effect.

On plunged the frantic horses, passing directly over the fallen outlaw chief; on and on, until, in sweeping around an abrupt angle, they came full upon a heavy barricade!

There was no time to check them—to save them from the injuries such a collision rendered inevitable, and with a warning yell to the miner the Jehu threw the lines from around him, grasped the shotgun and made a flying leap from the top of the coach.

At that instant the shock came. Down went the leaders, bruised and maimed by the barricade, and upon them piled the wheelers, while the stage rocked violently and then turned upon its side.

The road-agents greeted this disaster with a yell of delight, and promptly sprung forward to finish their red work.

Fortunately, Johnny Morgan had landed upon his feet, to be joined almost instantly by his gallant ally, the miner.

"Hot work now, pard, or they'll get ther gold ye carry!" gritted the latter, as he opened fire with a fresh revolver.

"Et's do or die!" Johnny returned, as grimly.

The two brave fellows were in a desperate strait, and they knew it. Retreat they could not, for it would be death to attempt to scale the barricade.

But at that moment, even as the Jehu leveled his shotgun at the foremost of their foes, sharp hoofstrokes rung out along the shadowy trail and a masked horseman appeared just back of the outlaws.

Instantly a peculiar whistle pealed from the lips of the strange rider, and to a man the road-agents turned and sped away in full retreat.

Wheeling his horse, the rider galloped after them.

"Great God!" ejaculated Johnny Morgan, dropping his gun and staggering back like one wounded unto death, his white brow reeking with beads of sweat. "Great God! Murray Weston, do you know who that man was?"

"It was Gold-Dust Dan, and he is the leader of Old Nick's Nine!"

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN NICK'S DOUBLE.

It was with the greatest reluctance that Winnie Moulton consented to seek shelter in the canyon cavern.

Her soul burned with impatience to reach Slocum City, and the enforced delay was almost unbearable.

The cavern into which the driver had conducted her and her two companions in hiding was small, perfectly dry and well-lighted, and a number of bowlders afforded the party seats.

"Verily, this is far better than exposing ourselves to the bullets of those ungodly road-agents," observed Rev. Uriah Smoothly, when the steps of their retreating guide had died away. "Poor, benighted creatures! I fear they are all doomed to die in sin!"

He sighed, clasped his hands and rolled his eyes upward until nothing was visible through his spectacles save a gleam of white.

"Sin—fiddlesticks!" growled the miner, his sensual red lips curling. "They'll die in they're boots—some ov 'em, ef they run up ag'in' Johnny Morgan—mind thet! Blast him fer a hot-head, eny way! They're ahead yender, an' he intends ter show fight—ther foolishhest thing in ther world! People 'at can't hide theyre money so thet road-agents won't find et orto't kerry et. Now, I've got over two thousand dollars with me, an' I'll bet ther smartest thief ov an agent on ther Sand Bar trail c'dn't find et!"

"Is it possible?" ejaculated Smoothly, opening his eyes very wide.

"Possible? et's a cinch!" the miner averred, and grasping one of his boot-heels he gave it a violent wrench, whereupon it came off in his hand.

He then produced a small key, with which he opened the beel, disclosing a number of bills of large denominations.

"Et's my own invention!" he exclaimed, proudly. "Think a road-thief w'd think ter look thar, hey? Nary! Bin held up three times in two months, an' I kerry ther scads yet!"

"You have been fortunate," returned the Rev. Smoothly, with a sigh. "For myself, I carry as little money as possible. A year ago I was held up on a stage out of Virginia City, and it cost me a trifle over \$5,000. That cured me."

"No, road-agents will never secure a great sum from me. The only thing I fear is being

captured and held for ransom. In that event, I am sure my fond, foolish wife would yield up our last dollar to effect my deliverance."

"Better do that than be left a lone widdy," the miner remarked, and then he proceeded to close and replace his boot-heel.

Winnie Moulton listened attentively to this friendly exchange of confidences, but said nothing.

The miner's appearance did not impress her favorably. He was a hulking, heavily-built fellow, low-browed and thick-lipped, with restless, cruel-looking, pale-blue eyes. She did not trust the man, and watched him narrowly.

For a moment the trio sat in silence. Winnie was about to address a question to Smoothly, when a distant crash of firearms brought the two men to their feet.

"Thar! Johnny Morgan is inter biz!" cried the miner, with the flash of the eyes only too suggestive of jubilant exultation.

Smoothly uttered no response, but listened intently until the sounds of the brief conflict had died away.

"I believe he has escaped the scoundrels," he ventured, at length. "At least I have heard no yell of triumph to announce his fall."

"I pray Heaven he has escaped them!" cried Winnie, impulsively.

The miner turned and looked at her, a peculiar smile curling his full lips.

"Amen!" he muttered, a tinge of mockery in his deep tones.

The trio then returned to their seats, and the battle became the theme of conversation.

The minutes passed slowly. The shadows in the canyon deepened, and the little cavern became shrouded in almost utter darkness.

Suddenly a sound of voices and the steady tramping of men came from without, and Smoothly sprang softly to his feet and peered through the network of vines.

"It's the road-agent gang," he announced, in a penetrating whisper. "They are passing directly up to the canyon. Not a sound, now, or—"

A heavy blow on the back of the head sent him crashing through the vines to the ground, senseless. Just a breath, then Winnie Moulton felt a pair of strong arms thrown around her, while the miner shouted:

"This way, pards! Hyar aire the birds, snug and safe!"

At this act of treachery, Winnie Moulton's heart sunk like lead, and for a moment she lay inert and helpless; then her blood rose in hot indignation, and she struggled gamely to break from the relentless grasp of her captor.

"You wretch! you villain!" she gritted, clinching her tiny hand and dashing it repeatedly against the face of the ruffian. "Let me loose, or—"

"Keep quiet—you!" savagely interrupted the pretended miner, dexterously shifting his hold so as to confine her arms. "Oh, ya-as! I'll let ye go, ye little vixen! But I'll take ther wire aidge off'n yer temper, fu'st!"

Meanwhile the men out in the canyon were not idle.

They had halted at the warning shout of their confederate within the cavern, and, after the briefest of consultations, hurried in that direction.

"Thet war Pueblo Pete," declared the foremost, as they started forward. "He war ter come up on ther fuss, so's ter lend us a helpin' hand inside when we jumped ther ole vehicle, but fer some reason er another he must 'a' gotten off down hyar. Aha! he's laid his meat cold!"

The ejaculation was called forth by the discovery of Smoothly's inanimate form at the cave entrance, and while the speaker bent over the body his companions pushed through the screen of vines.

"Strike a light, pards," requested the pretended miner, Pueblo Pete. "Strike a light, an' stan' stiddy jest a minute."

"What ye got, Pueblo—a wildcat?" asked one of the group, fumbling in his pocket for his waterproof match-safe. "Thought I heer'd ye tusslin' a bit ago."

"Wildcat—you bet!" the ruffian returned, in savage tones. "Et's Colonel Sandy's gal, an' she's clawed my face inter ribbons—the Jezebel!"

A round of half-suppressed laughter followed the words, and then a lucifer flared up, revealing the now trembling captive and her brutal captor.

"Give me a rope, some ov ye," cried Pueblo, with an oath, plainly nettled by the admiring glances his companions in crime were bestowing upon the helpless creature in his arms. "An' take a look arter ther critter outside thar, an'

don't let him escape, or I reckon some ov ye will settle with ther cap'n!"

"Who or what is he, Pueblo?" asked one of the men, as he drew a stout thong from one of his pockets and passed it around Winnie's wrists. "Ye know ther rule ov ther Nine; no prisoners!"

"The sanctiferous cuss is ther Rev. Uriah Smoothly, once a sky-pilot, but now a rich mine-owner," Pueblo Pete returned. "Twar ther cap'n's orders that I gather him in ef possible, an' mebbe et wasn't nuts when Johnny Morgan scented you fellers ahead an' laid us by hyar till he c'd pull through! Thar's a prospect ov a fat ransom, an' thet fetched ther cap'n inter et, I reckon. Es fer this lump ov sweetness, I corraled her on my own hook."

While the outlaw was speaking, his hands were not idle. Winnie Moulton found her wrists securely pinioned, while a red bandana covered her eyes.

"Now, little 'un," cautioned the ruffian, addressing his captive, "keep quiet an' I won't gag ye. Soon es we reach ther Den, I'll take these traps off'n ye."

Then the party filed out into the canyon, where the others of the villainous cohort were in waiting, with Smoothly in their midst, bound and blindfolded.

Straight up the narrow, gloomy pass they laid their course, keeping well together and talking in subdued tones. A mile thus, then the trail turned to the warth, leading through a long and tortuous fissure into a snug little valley.

In this narrow rift, midway between the canyon and the valley, the retreating road-agents were overtaken by a horseman, the same mysterious personage who had sounded the recall during the attack on the stage.

The rough crew parted right and left, leaving a free passage between their ranks, for all suspected the captain to be in an ill-humor and dreaded a furious outburst.

Gruff enough, and curt, he certainly was. As he drew rein in their midst, his keen eyes singled out the hulking form of Pueblo Pete.

"You trapped the sky-pilot, Pete?" he demanded, in tones subdued and husky.

"I did, chief, an' Jehu Johnny, without knowing et, helped my game erlong," replied the outlaw, with a grin that was lost in the darkness.

"And this other captive, the lady—who is she?"

"Colonel Sandy's gal," was the reluctant reply.

"By what authority did you capture her?" and the voice of the outlaw chief grew cold and ominous.

"'Twar done fer ther good ov ther Nine, chief. Ther colonel 'll pay a big ransom—"

"Enough! That girl goes on to Slocum City at once! And never again, my man, go beyond your orders, if you value your neck!"

And leaning over, the chief seized Winnie Moulton and lifted her to a seat before him.

"Go on to the Den!" he cried to his followers.

"Guard your prisoner carefully, and keep well under cover. Know ye that Old Nick's Nine is threatened with danger! Armed men are patrolling these hills, seeking our trail!"

A murmur of surprise escaped the men; but ere a voice could be heard, the chief wheeled his horse and dashed away.

Sullenly the men pushed onward, following the tortuous course of the pass, until at length it opened into a miniature valley, their headquarters.

A sharp challenge greeted their approach, and at the countersign the sentry stepped out from the deeper shadow of the rocks, accompanied by a single horseman.

"Hurry along, lads," the sentry cried. "Captain Nick is waitin'!"

"Captain Nick!"

A gasp of amazement, well-nigh of terror, followed the words, and the outlaws gazed blankly at each other in the darkness.

Pueblo Pete was the first to recover his wits. Uttering an oath, he strode up to the horseman.

"Cap'n Nick!"

"Ay, Pete?"

"By all ther furies! we've bin tricked—duped—robbed ov our booty!" and with a perfect torrent of oaths, the burly rascal narrated what had occurred in the pass.

The chief listened in grim silence, his teeth set savagely upon his nether lip, his steely eyes glittering viciously.

"No blame can attach to you my men," he exclaimed, when Pete had finished; "but my double spoke to you as I would have spoken: You must obey orders—no more, no less; and we must keep under cover, or seek new fields!"

"But the stage—the booty taken from it?"

"We took no booty from ther stage, Cap'n Nick," averred another of the gang, stepping forward. He then recounted all that had occurred at the barricade.

"Curse the luck! Three of our best men killed, and the game lost at the moment it was ours!" gritted the chief. "Boys, this double of mine must be wiped out, and I will do it at once!"

"Pete, pick a squad and go back to the barricade and bury our pards killed by that devil of a Jehu."

"Injun Robe, take charge of the prisoner, and see that he is not spirited away. Guard him night and day!"

Then, with a parting wave of his hand, Captain Nick—better known throughout the Gold Range as "Old Nick"—wheeled his horse and galloped madly up the valley, hissing between his bleeding lips:

"Now for this infernal detective—this whelp of a Gold-Dust Dan! Curse him! he shall rue the hour he took my name!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE ACCUSATION.

SLOCUM CITY was the "gem" camp of the Gold Range.

It lay along the foot of the northern slope of a beautiful little valley, half a hundred cabins and shanties all told, two two-story double cabins serving as hotels.

One of these hostelries was known as the River House, from the fact that the rear end of the building overhung the high, straight bank of the Devil's Mill-Race, a wild mountain torrent, having its course near the middle of the valley.

Less than a hundred yards below the hotel, this stream dashed over a precipice some fifty to sixty feet in height, churning the water into a misty cloud as it encountered the mass of jagged rock at the foot of the fall.

Twice within the brief history of the "city" had the Devil's Mill-Race claimed a victim. The first, a miner, had fallen into the stream from the narrow foot-bridge just above the River House, and been whirled over the falls in but little more than the twinkling of an eye. The second unfortunate was a stranger who, putting up for the night at the hotel, had fallen from the window of his room into the seething tide and been swept into eternity.

Anent this second catastrophe, some of the more hardy of the camp denizens had hinted rather broadly at foul play—robbery and murder. But Juan Mendoza, the landlord, met the charge boldly, demanding that proof of his guilt be adduced. The proof was not forthcoming, whereupon he shot the chief of his traducers dead, mortally wounded a second, and literally drove the others out of camp at the point of his revolver. And there the matter ended.

The other hotel, known as the Miners' Ark, was located in the upper end of the camp, and was run by a Jew, to whom the gold-seekers, in their free and easy way, had given the name of Old Noah.

Both houses had a bar, with a gambling-hall attached, and here were wont to congregate by night the majority of the two hundred denizens of the camp.

Just after sunset of the day on which we have seen the stage attacked by Old Nick's Nine, a tall, finely-formed man of middle age, well-dressed, and wearing a belt of arms, quitted the bar-room of the River House, and leisurely made his way up the rude "street" in the direction of the Ark.

This man was Great Jones, of the Great Jones Mine. He was the pioneer of Slocum City, having discovered and developed the rich leads which had called the camp into being.

His real name probably not more than three men in the Gold Range knew. He had called his richest find the Great Jones Mine, and the miners in turn had applied the same title to himself.

Alongside the Ark stood a shanty a trifle more pretentious than the majority of its neighbors, and a rudely-lettered sign above the door bore the words:

"BEN BLUFF,

"MERCHANDISE FROM ALL PORTS.

"CHEAPEST STORE IN THE GOLD RANGE."

Into this place Great Jones leisurely made his way.

"Hello, Bluff!" he saluted, with a friendly nod to the proprietor, an odd-looking, little old man, who sat on a box smoking a pipe and beating a monotonous tattoo on the floor with the end of his wooden leg.

"Evenin', cap'n—evenin'!" he returned, between puffs. Then, taking the pipe from between his teeth: "W'at kin I do fer you, to-night?"

"I want some socks and handkerchiefs," Great Jones replied, with a careless glance around the store. Trade isn't on the boom to-night, eh?"

"You're ther fu'st craft in sence ther bell struck!" declared Old Ben, lazily rising and knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Nigger—nigger—nigger! Come aft, you sable son ov Ham!"

In response to this vigorous hail, a black boy made his appearance from some nook in the rear of the room and came dancing "aft," with a broad grin displaying his gleaming ivories.

"Now, Monkey, you tend to business," cautioned the storekeeper, impressively. "Me an' Mr. Jones are goin' below decks to look at some goods. An', mind you, Monkey, don't you mention it to a soul ef any one drops in."

"Kerrect, boss! Dis brack chile's bery fly," grinned the darky.

"Thereupon, Ben Bluff led the way to the back part of the store, where he raised a narrow trap-door, disclosing a flight of steps leading down into an underground apartment.

Great Jones was evidently familiar with the place, for he took the lead in descending, and was comfortably seated beside a small table by the time Bluff had closed the door and lighted a candle.

"Thar anything new, cap'n?" inquired the storekeeper, as he settled himself opposite his visitor and produced pipes and tobacco from the table drawer.

"There is nothing new, Ben—not a word," was the low-voiced reply. "In fact, I have almost given up the last hope of unearthing this relentless, mysterious foe."

"Never say die, cap'n! Dash my top-lights! we'll hook ther shark yet!" exclaimed Bluff, a savage tremor in his voice, his dark eyes flashing, his ruddy face taking on a deeper tinge. "Never say die! Think ov yer wrongs, an' take heart! Whar is yer wife, an' yer leetle gal? Why are ye an outlaw, with a price upon yer head? My God! Bart Wildman, I have suffered at that man's hands, but stood I in your shoes, I'd come back from the grave that he should not escape unwhipped of justice!"

"Let me but find him!" uttered the mine-owner, with grim significance. "We have hunted him for years; he has seemed ever near, yet has given us the slip more times than I care to recall. It is not strange that I despair!"

"No, it's not strange," Bluff admitted, tugging savagely at his short, gray beard. "Fifteen years ago the fifth of last July, Margie and little Viola disappeared, and the trail dates from that day. But I believe that God is just—that the trail must end, and that man receive his punishment."

"And, look ye, Bart, this last blow—this safe-robbery—may it not be the means of insnaring him? For it was *his* work—we cannot doubt that. You know, too, that Colonel Sandy saw the thief, and could identify him."

Great Jones shook his head, but did not trust himself to speak. He was at that moment assailed by a thought he dared not utter even to his trusted friend and companion.

Mechanically, he took up, filled and lighted a pipe.

"I came in, Ben, to say that I am going away again to-night," he remarked after a moment. "I may return before morning, perhaps not for a day or two. In the latter event, I wish you to keep an eye on affairs."

"All right, cap'n. It's ther ole business, I s'pose?" and Bluff reassumed the camp dialect.

"Yes; the robbery has made it necessary for me to crowd matters, at any hazard."

At this point, the voices of the two men sunk yet lower—to a guarded whisper. They had approached a subject upon which they desired the greatest secrecy.

This inaudible conversation was of short duration. At its conclusion the two arose and quitted the underground chamber, Ben Bluff leading the way.

Monkey, the black boy, was found alone in the store. He reported that no one had dropped in during their absence, and with a nod of satisfaction Great Jones took his departure.

Ben Bluff refilled and relighted his pipe, then returned to his seat on the box and resumed his monotonous tattoo.

During the remainder of the evening the ex-sailor wore a preoccupied air, and the two or three customers who dropped in were curtly turned over to Monkey.

Promptly at ten o'clock, Bluff gave the order to close up. When everything had been made snug for the night, he let himself out at the back door and hurried away in the direction of the River House.

Both he and the darky slept at the store, and it was an unusual thing for the ex-sailor to quit the place during the evening.

As he neared the hotel, there were rapid steps behind him, accompanied with the occasional clicking of spurs; then a hand fell lightly upon his shoulder, and a pleasant voice exclaimed:

"Hello, Bluff Ben! Whither bound at this unseemly hour?"

"Eh? Is it you, Colonel Sandy?" returned the storekeeper, withdrawing his hand from the revolver butt to which it had dropped. "Why, I'm travelin' your way—to ther River House."

"That's good! We don't see you there often. I think we'd better take a drink to celebrate the occasion."

A dozen paces took them to the door of the bar-room, and the colonel led the way into the place.

A full score men were gathered in groups about the bar, all engaged in an earnest discussion of some exciting topic. Even the crowd surrounding the gaming-tables in the rear of the room had ceased playing and were busy with the same subject.

"What's gone wrong, Jerry?" asked the colonel, addressing the burly henchman behind the bar.

"Aw, der huss ain't in, an' der galoots t'ink Old Nick's Nine's on der road," was the reply.

The colonel started.

"I hope not!" he exclaimed. "Why, I had a pretty stiff bundle of stuff coming in on the harse to-day!"

"An' so, I believe, had Great Jones," remarked Bluff. "Leastways, it runs in my head he told me as much."

"Wal, thet's derved rough on Jones," put in a miner hard by. "Et's ten ter one Ole Nick's grabbed ther pile."

At that moment, the outer door was flung open, to admit a slender, well-built youth.

The colonel had been on the point of speaking; but his flashing eyes encountered this new-comer and he started violently, amazement written on every feature.

Just a breath he remained silent, then sprung between the youth and the door, crying:

"Men of Slocum! there is the man—the thief! He who robbed Great Jones stands before you!"

Coldly, sternly rung his powerful voice, and the muzzle of his leveled revolver covered the heart of the astounded youth.

A hush like that of death came over the murmuring throng. Then the full portent of that terrible accusation dawned upon all, and almost to a man they grasped their weapons.

For a moment the youth stood as if spell-bound, his keen, dark eyes fixed upon his accuser's face. Then, coldly, and deliberately, without a tremor in his voice:

"You are Colonel Sandy Moulton?"

"I am!" was the terse reply.

"Then, Colonel Moulton, let me say to you that you have lied! I, Gold-Dust Dan, am not the thief—and you know it! More than that—Stop!—none of that, colonel, or I shall kill you as I would a rabid dog!"

Colonel Moulton grew white to the lips. The wolfish glitter of his eyes had betrayed his purpose. His revolver covered the youth, but he dared not fire; those coldly uttered words warned him that to press the trigger meant death to himself.

For, lightly clasped in the youth's right hand was a glittering weapon of heavy caliber—one of the new and deadly self-cocking tools—with the hammer raised almost to a poise under the pressure of the finger pressing the trigger.

A shot just then meant death to both.

The excited throng grew restless under this delay, brief as it was. An ominous murmur arose, and the men in the front rank were slowly, surely, pushed forward by those in the rear. A weapon gleamed in almost every hand, and it was evident that the men of Slocum City were determined the youth should not escape.

For a full minute Colonel Sandy Moulton glared straight into the stern, dark orbs of his foe; then a crimson tide of rage supplanted his pallor, and in a voice hoarse with passion he exclaimed:

"You young hound! you deserve the rope!"

"I have said the truth, and I repeat it: You are the man who robbed Great Jones's safe!"

"More than that, I doubt not you are one of Old Nick's Nine!"

"Just one, Colonel Sandy?" lightly jeered the youth, a hard glitter in his dark eyes, his

red lips curling with scorn. "Just one, my brave brigadier? You—"

"Just one, Gold-Dust Dan!—and that one the head devil of the gang!" interpolated a harsh, grating voice.

"Gents, the colonel's right—you've got my Bible oath on that!"

The speaker was Jehu Johnny. He stood just inside the door, grim, bloody, powder-stained, a cocked revolver in each hand!

CHAPTER V.

A LIFE AT STAKE.

It needed no second glance at Jehu Johnny to verify the current suspicion that the stage had been "held up."

The dashing Jehu was in a sad plight. His clothing had been almost torn from his body, and he was bleeding profusely from a wound in his right shoulder and another in the right side.

The crowd greeted his confirmation of Colonel Moulton's words with a vicious roar, and again fifty pairs of eyes gleamed wickedly at Gold-Dust Dan.

"Death ter Ole Nick!"

"Kill him!"

"Hang him!"

"Judge Lynch forever!"

These cries and a score more of similar import rent the stifling air, while the maddened men wildly brandished their weapons.

Yet not a shot was fired, not a forward step made.

Gold-Dust Dan smiled sardonically.

As yet he held the upper hand, and he knew it. Both Moulton and Morgan were covered by his revolvers.

A moment of this suspense, then the door behind the half-crazed Jehu was thrown open, and two men entered.

The foremost was Ozark Oil. The appearance of the old mountain-man just at this time afforded Gold-Dust Dan no little satisfaction.

The man just behind Ozark Oil was none other than Juan Mendoza, a lithe, trim-built Mexican of uncertain age.

Mendoza, it will be remembered, owned the River House; but the gambling-hall connected therewith was under the direct control of Colonel Sandy Moulton.

"Oho! oho! an' what on 'arth's broken loose hyar?" the old mountain-man demanded, coming to a sudden halt, his hands grasping the revolver-butts protruding from his belt. "Haliker! ef et don't look like a scrimmage let loose!"

A torrent of incoherent explanations came from the crowd. In the midst of the bustle and confusion, Ben Bluff approached the old mountain-man unobserved and in a guarded tone uttered half a dozen sentences.

"Right—right as a trivet!" Ozark declared, when the storekeeper had ended. "Ef thar's any ov ther boys we kin depend onto, jist pass 'em ther word an' we'll stay by ther kid till he has a fair show."

Meanwhile, Colonel Sandy had explained the situation to Juan Mendoza. The wily Mexican listened with closest attention, apparently heeding nothing but the colonel's words; yet he overheard all that passed between Ozark Oil and the storekeeper.

"It does look dark for the youngster," Mendoza exclaimed, his restless dark eyes glancing from face to face. "But mere appearances do not prove anything, gentlemen, so don't let your hot heads run away with you. The kid's got every right to a fair hearing that you or I would have, and his guilt must be proved before a hand is lifted against him in violence. You hear me—and I'm right here to back up every syllable!"

"Now ye're aboutin'—a fair trial!" cried Ozark Oil.

"He's guilty, fast enough—cuss him!" Jehu Johnny gritted, his eyes gleaming malevolently. "But try away—we kin prove him guilty!"

"Oh, the lad must have a show for his life, Johnny—a fair, unprejudiced show," Colonel Sandy protested. "While I think with you that there can be no doubt of his guilt, I must admit that I have acted hastily in the matter. For the credit of the camp, he must be given the biggest kind of a chance to prove himself innocent."

"Slocum City is on the boom, you know, and we don't want any nasty rumors flying about. If we jumped into this affair blindly and made a mistake, the thing would reach the other camps and there is no telling how much hurt it would do us."

This view of the case seemed to strike the majority of the crowd as correct, and when the

murmur of assent had subsided, Gold-Dust Dan nodded grimly, saying:

"Have it that way, gents—bring on your court. But understand one thing—I am not a prisoner, nor do I intend to yield my weapons."

Then so swiftly that none could prevent it, he turned and with two or three bounds gained the north wall of the building, where he faced about, ready for the worst, with the solid timber at his back.

"Bravo! That was well done, boy!" ejaculated Juan Mendoza, with a vivid flash of his black eyes.

"And now, pard, I move that a judge be appointed to conduct the trial, and that the crowd be the jury, a clear majority to rule."

A roar of approval greeted this motion, and Mendoza was declared the judge.

The trial then proceeded.

Colonel Sandy Moulton swore positively that on the night of the robbery he had seen the accused stealthily quit the office of the Great Jones Mine, carrying a parcel. The colonel, it was remembered, had promptly given the alarm, but in the darkness the bold thief managed to elude his pursuers. There could be no mistake; Gold-Dust Dan was the man who came out of the office.

Then Jehu Johnny took the stand. He was growing faint from the loss of blood, and spoke slowly and in a weak voice.

He had known Gold-Dust Dan nearly a month; the accused was in the employ of the stage-company as a secret patrol. They had arranged between them a code of signals, that the driver might know when danger threatened at any point. Having made this true explanation, Jehu Johnny told his story, describing the run up from Sand Bar, the halt at the relay station, the start from this, espial of the danger-signal, the killing of the three passengers, the attack and the fatal ambush, and his discovery that Old Nick was none other than Gold-Dust Dan.

"Then," he continued, his dark eyes gaining in brilliancy, "Deputy Weston and myself got the treasure out of the bearse and hid it away, as we were both wounded and utterly unable to clear the trail, and knew not what minute the devils might return to finish their work."

"By the time we had accomplished this, it was pitch-dark. Leaving Weston to guard the gold, I went back to the cave in the canyon to fetch up the passengers, but found no one, while there were evidences of a struggle."

"And let me say to you, Colonel Sandy, that the lady passenger was your daughter."

"My daughter!" gasped the colonel, in profound astonishment. "Heavens! man—you must be mistaken!"

"Oh, no, I'm not," Jehu Johnny calmly declared. "And, more than that, colonel, it is my belief that she is at this very moment in the lands of Old Nick's Nine."

This announcement seemed to fall upon the handsome gambler with stunning force; before he could utter a word, however, the door opened and into the room walked Winnie Moulton!

A murmur of surprise came from the crowd, a faint yell of delight from the jehu. The colonel started as if confronted by an apparition, then rushed forward with extended arms.

Strangely enough, Winnie parried the threatened ardent embrace, and greeted her father in a cool and formal manner.

"Come, my dear child," exclaimed the colonel, as soon as he had collected his wits. "This is no place for you. You must go up to my room, where you can remain until more suitable quarters are provided. This visit is another surprise, and you find me wholly unprepared to give you a fitting reception. You—"

"Beg your pardon, colonel, but if your daughter is willing to take the stand, she may be able to throw some light on this case," interrupted Juan Mendoza, with a profound bow.

Colonel Moulton seemed annoyed, but before he could speak, Winnie said:

"I am willing to testify, sir. In fact, I came in for that purpose."

A ripple of applause came from the miners, to be sternly suppressed by Juan Mendoza, and then, amid almost breathless silence, Winnie Moulton narrated her adventures.

"Look closely at the accused, there, and tell me if you recognize him as the horseman who took you from the outlaws in the canyon," Mendoza requested, when she had finished.

Winnie walked straight up to Gold-Dust Dan. At that moment, a crowd of half-drunken miners entered, having come down from the Ark to witness the trial, and it was several minutes before order was restored.

"I am sure that man is not the outlaw

chief," Winnie announced, as soon as her voice could be heard.

"You are sure he is not the man who took you from the outlaws in the canyon?" Mendoza questioned, with lowering brow.

"I do not see how he could be that man, for as soon as we had entered the camp the outlaw put me on my feet, pointed out this place, then turned and rode away at high speed. I made my way almost directly here, and was just in time to hear my father accuse this man of being the Great Jones robber."

"No, no; there is a mistake somewhere."

"That will do," said Mendoza grimly.

Then Colonel Sandy came forward, and with Winnie quitted the place.

"Has the defense anything to offer?"

Ozark Oil moved out from the crowd, and, addressing the judge, said:

"May it please your Honor, I'll undertake to defend the youngster; but let me take some leetle time to rake up our evidence, and I therefore moves this trial be continued till tomorrow night."

"What say you?" and Mendoza's restless dark eyes swept the crowd.

"You've found the snake, now kill it!" uttered a burly fellow in the front rank.

"Yas, yas! let's a clear case he stole Great Jones's money."

"Nary wait!"

"Run out ther rope!"

A perfect jargon of cries arose, all clamoring for the death of the accused.

"Keno!"

Sharp and sibilant, the word rung through the room, followed instantly by the crash of a dozen revolvers, and every light flickered and went out!

"Guard the doors—the windows!" shouted Mendoza, in a voice hoarse with rage. "Look sharp, or the whelp will escape!"

Thus warned, the mob scattered and took possession of the doors and windows. A moment, then a match flashed behind the bar, and in another minute the lamps were relighted.

Too late! Gold-Dust Dan was missing, and with him Ozark Oil!

CHAPTER VI.

ENTRAPPED.

"LADY, here we part. Yonder is the River House, and there you will find your father."

The speaker was the masked horseman, the pretended outlaw chief, and the one he addressed was Winnie Moulton.

"Sir, I thank you; and let me say that, though you are in the guise of an outlaw, I know you to be an honest man—one playing a desperate role that evil-doers may not escape unpunished."

"Pray keep that suspicion wholly to yourself, Miss Moulton," laughed the rider, yet with a strain of earnestness in his voice. "In this region, men are hanged sometimes for less than that!"

"And now, good-night."

"Good-night, and good luck!"

A jangle of spurs, and the horse dashed away. Had Winnie Moulton looked back, she would have seen that the steed was riderless!

But, the girl was thinking deeply, and her thoughts were most unpleasant.

"Now that I am here, I will settle the vexing question for good and all!" she uttered, her even, white teeth meeting with a determined click, and then she walked slowly toward the River House.

But she was not to reach that place uninterrupted.

Just as she entered the circle of light thrown out by the lamp over the doorway, she was confronted by a tall old man with gleaming, restless gray eyes and a bushy white beard and long white hair.

He was shabbily dressed, wore a large slouch hat and rusty high-top boots, and in the belt about his waist hung a brace of heavy revolvers and a huge bowie.

Not a word did this singular personage utter. He stared fixedly into the face of the girl, his eyes filling with a strange light—a light that might indicate either hope or fear.

Startled, Winnie shrunk back a pace, drawing from her pocket a small revolver.

"Nay, nay, little 'un—no need o' that!" exclaimed the old fellow, in a husky voice. "Bless yer eyes! not a hair o' yer purty head would Crazy Mose harm or see harmed!"

"You do not look like a ruffian," retorted Winnie, impulsively, as she put away the weapon. "But I am a stranger here, and you startled me."

"And I beg your pardon a thousand times!"

earnestly. "Somewhere on this earth is a little girl I have not seen for years, though I've sought her long and constantly. Something told me all the day I should meet her soon, and—Well, when I first glimpsed your face, I would have sworn 'twas hers!" with a haggard smile.

"But I delay you, little 'un. Go your way, an' when you need a friend remember that you can count on old Mose—demand his very life if it will save you from your enemies in this camp!"

"Enemies?"

"Ay, little 'un! They may tell you old Mose is crazy—that his head is wrong; but old Mose knows a thing or two. Listen. The man you seek is your worst foe! Beware of him!"

Having thus spoken, the old fellow turned and darted away. The girl gazed after him earnestly, longingly, as if strongly tempted to call him back. His words had impressed her most vividly, despite his apparent lunacy.

"No, no; he can know nothing," she murmured, again turning toward the River House. "It is strange, though, that he should have hit upon the very fear that preys upon my mind. If it comes to the worst, I must not forget Crazy Mose!"

Winnie Moulton sat beside a table in Colonel Sandy's comfortably furnished room, a resolute look on her fair young face.

Before her lay a closely written document, evidently penned by a woman.

"Is it true or false?" she uttered, half-aloud. "Is Barbara Garot's confession real, or but a tissue of lies marking the initial stroke of the vengeance she once vowed should be hers?"

"Ah, it is real—it is true! My heart tells me as much, and reason urges it. I am not the child of Colonel Sandy Moulton! And if that much be true, why not all that old Barbara sets forth?"

These and kindred thoughts had occupied her mind almost from the moment she entered the room. Colonel Sandy, warned by the crash of firearms below, had left her at the threshold, to hurry back to the stirring scene in the bar-room.

That same volley had alarmed Winnie not a little, and she had listened most intently until satisfied that the young borderman, Gold-Dust Dan, had escaped. That fact established, she entered the room and seated herself at the table, to ponder the vexing problem assailing her.

Thus an hour passed and then a step in the hallway warned her of the colonel's return. Hurriedly folding the document that lay before her, she thrust it into the bosom of her dress and calmly awaited his appearance.

A moment later, the door opened and Moulton entered. His face was pale, he had a hurried look, and his dark eyes gleamed desperately.

"That accursed young outlaw has escaped!" he announced, his lips quivering with suppressed passion. "He had accomplices in the crowd, who shot the lights out, and under cover of darkness spirited him away. It is the first time in the history of the camp that such a thing has happened, and it will be the last! Hereafter, people of his ilk will be hanged first and tried afterward!"

"I do not believe that he is the guilty man," declared Winnie, calmly.

Moulton stared at her sharply. After a moment, he flung himself into a chair, and asked, abruptly:

"What caused you to leave school and come West so suddenly, Winnie? You know that such a move is against my expressed wishes."

"I do know that, yes, sir. But let me reply to your question by asking one:

"Did you ever know a Captain Rufus Blake?"

"Captain Rufus Blake—the devil!"

And with that inelegant ejaculation Colonel Sandy leaped to his feet and glared at the girl as if he doubted his ears.

"Pray keep cool, captain!" continued the girl, with the calmness born of a fixed purpose. "If I am not mistaken, you'll have need of all your wits before this interview is ended."

"And, now, tell me if you ever met a woman known as Barbara Garot."

There was no response.

"You might also state, captain, what cause you and Barbara Garot had to hate so bitterly and wrong so deeply one Bartley Wildman."

An oath came from between the clinched teeth of Colonel Moulton. His slim white fingers worked convulsively, and his tall form swayed forward, as if he would hurl himself upon the girl in murderous fury.

A deft movement of her dimpled hands, and Winnie held a leveled revolver between herself and the handsome desperado.

"Speak!" she commanded, her voice cold and

blue eyes gleaming like stars. "As daughter of Bartley Wildman, I demand an account of that foul wrong!"

A coward at heart, Colonel Sandy shrunk back. Girl, though she was, Winnie had cowed the gambler.

"Girl—girl! you drive me mad!" he faltered. "Who has put this tissue of silly lies into your head?"

Heavy, shuffling steps in the hallway checked the stern retort rising to the lips of the girl. A faint tapping, and then the door was flung open, disclosing a tall, angular fellow, with restless gray eyes and a foxy-looking yellow beard. He was clad in rags, but was heavily armed, and looked every inch a cut-throat.

"Evenin', folks," he saluted, shuffling into the room and closing the door. "Bin practicin' fer a meller-dramer?"

The effect of this intrusion was almost magical, so far as Colonel Sandy was concerned. His trepidation vanished; his face flushed, then grew livid with anger.

"Get out of the room, this instant, you skulking hound!" he grated, starting forward, his hand seeking the butt of one of the heavy revolvers in his girdle. "You wretched vagabond! I'll teach you a—"

"Whip light an' drive slow, *Captain Blake!*" interrupted the intruder, with peculiar emphasis. "Guess you've forgotten me, poor devil that I was, an' am, or mebba ye wouldn't talk so rash! But I know you—worse luck!"

For the second time that evening Colonel Sandy's nerve deserted him, leaving him weak and powerless. His hand fell away from the weapon, and he stared blankly at the vagabond.

"Don't fall in a fit, ole pard!" cautioned the intruder, with a mocking leer. "Brace up an' try ter be a man. I'm in hard luck, an' I'm hyar ter sell out, either ter you or—ther gal!"

Winnie, her interest now thoroughly awakened, glanced from the ruffian to Colonel Sandy.

"Hush—say no more!" weakly uttered the latter. "I will talk to you presently. Only go, until I have settled matters with this head-strong girl."

"Nary go, ole pard!" quoth the ruffian, with a grim little laugh. "I'm needed right hyar, an' hyar I'll tarry!"

"Oh, sir, I'm glad to hear you say that!" Winnie exclaimed, earnestly. "I do need your help, and will reward you most liberally."

"Yourn till death, miss! Sarge'nt Sly can't go back on beauty in distress—not with a show fer ducats in sight! Jes' say somethin' ter set me a-goin', fer I'm all ready ter wade in!"

"Very well, then. You may seize and disarm that man," and the girl pointed to Colonel Sandy.

"Easy sed, an' easy done!" grinned he of the yellow beard, his furtive gray eyes meeting the glowing orbs of the gambler in a steady stare.

"Now, ole pard, don't ye make a go ter resist, or et'll be ther wuss fer ye!"

With that, he lunged forward, his hands outstretched to pluck the revolvers from the belt of the gambler; but Colonel Sandy deftly brushed aside the crooked, claw-like fingers, and with a fierce, snarling cry grappled the ruffian.

To and fro whirled the two men in a desperate struggle, each striving to break the other's hold. A sudden lurch, and over went the table, extinguishing the candle and leaving the room in total darkness.

Winnie uttered a sharp cry and started back. At the same instant a pair of powerful arms closed around her, and the revolver was wrenched from her hand.

"Jest strike a light, colonel. I've got her!" The voice was that of Sarge'nt Sly!

CHAPTER VII.

A DESPERATE TRIO.

WHEN Colonel Sandy Moulton had secured and relighted the candle, it was discovered that Winnie was in a dead faint.

Taking the girl in his arms, the gambler crossed the room and placed her on a couch, where he securely pinioned her wrists.

"Good luck has not quite deserted us!" he chuckled, with a searching glance to satisfy himself that his work was well done. "Your hand, Sly. That ruse was admirably done. For a moment you deceived even me!"

The desperadoes shook hands.

"Thar was shoot in her eye, boss," quoth he of the yellow beard. "I know'd, too, ther gal hed friends in camp, ready an' anxious ter take a hand, an' so worked ther game."

"An' by ther same token, boss, ye'd better lock and bolt thet door."

Moulton uttered a mirthless little laugh.

"I do not think any one in Slocum City will molest us, Sly," he returned. "You forget that we are in the stronghold of Juan Mendoza!"

"Fergit nothin', boss," declared the desperado, with dogged earnestness. "Ther gal didn't come inter camp alone. Thet young bellyun, Gold-Dust Dan, fetched her hyar, an' atop ov thet both Crazy Mose an' Ozark Oil hed a confab wi' her afore she putt fut in ther bar-room."

The gambler's face changed. His quick wit now readily suggested an explanation of Winnie's course since her arrival, and he at once secured the door.

"That is better, boss," observed the "sergeant," as the bolts fell into place. "Cain't be too keerful ye know."

"An' now, ef I may ask, w'at do ye intend ter do with ther gal? Ye cain't keep 'er hyar."

"No. As soon as the camp is quiet for the night, we'll take her over to the canyon."

"'Twon't be a durned bit safer thar, boss."

"Why not?"

"Wal, I don't exactly like ther way things look over thar. Gold-Dust Dan is onto ther lay-out, an' ther leetle devil may lead a passel ov his friends in thar at any minute."

"He'll never escape his pursuers," averred the colonel, grimly.

Sergeant Sly lay back in his chair and laughed softly.

"Sandy, that kid ain't outside ov this camp, this blessed minute!" he declared. "More then thet," lowering his voice and leaning forward, "I'll bet ten dollars he's within reach of our voices!"

"Impossible!"

"No, et's jest as I tell ye," in the same cautious strains. "He's on ther shed roof, jest outside ther window thar."

"Furies! then—"

"Sh!—not so loud!" and Sergeant Sly gripped the gambler's arm with savage force. "We must ketch 'im nappin'!"

"But are you sure?"

"Sart'in some one's thar—most sure et's him. Do you go down an' fetch Mendoza up. Or, better—jest foller my cue."

Then, aloud:

"Yaas, sir, thet berdered kid's right hyar in Slocum—bet yer pile on it. We'd better run ther gal over thar, an' jest advise the gang ter light out fer safer quarters. Old Nick'll take ther tip fer jest w'ot thar is in et, an' et's odds he's got a safe hole picked out whar he kin make a stand till ther ruction's blowed over."

"I guess you're about right, Sly. We'll go just as soon as we can see Mendoza," returned the colonel.

"Let's go down an' git a drink an' talk the matter over with ther Greaser. The camp'll be quiet, so't we kin start in an hour."

The two men arose, looked to the bonds of the captive, who was yet unconscious, then quitted the room and descended the stairs.

In the lower hallway they halted, removed their boots, and stealthily retraced their steps, pausing just outside the door to the colonel's room.

Moulton knelt and applied his eye to the key-hole.

A cry of rage escaped him.

With a furious oath, he flung the door open and sprang into the room, closely followed by his confederate.

The couch was empty! Beside it on the floor lay the thongs of the captive, severed, while an open window betrayed the avenue of escape.

"Quick! They can't be off ther shed yet!" grated Sly, darting toward the window, revolver in hand.

Moulton was only a pace behind him.

A single glance was enough to show that the shed-roof was clear. There was not a soul visible, nor a sound indicative of flight to be heard.

Dismayed, the two desperadoes for the space of a half-minute mutely stared each other in the face.

"They did not go that way!" then cried Moulton. "They have given us the slip in the hall!" and with that, both wheeled toward the door.

"Halt!"

That one word of command, in strains ominously low and tense, came from the lips of Crazy Mose. He stood just inside the doorway, his face white and stern, his gray eyes glowing luridly.

In each hand he held a cocked revolver, the muzzles of which bore full upon the evil pair.

"Move but a step and you die!" he warned in the same deadly monotone.

"Madman! what mean you?" gritted Colonel Moulton, furiously. "My daughter has been abducted, and you bar pursuit!"

"I bar pursuit, yes! For I mean that an end to your villainy has come, Rufus Blake!"

"I bar pursuit because you have no right to pursue. She whom you claim as your daughter is my own flesh and blood!"

A sardonic smile lighted up Colonel Moulton's face.

"Your mind wanders," he sneered, his glance shifting from the face of the lunatic to the hallway and back again. "You talk in riddles! But, I warn you that if that devil escapes with the girl! I shall hold you to strict account! You have—"

A short, exultant cry followed. Crazy Mose had staggered forward and fallen to the floor unconscious, stricken down from behind by Juan Mendoza.

It was the stealthy approach of the Mexican, clubbed revolver in hand, that had called that evil smile to the face of Moulton.

"Bravo, Juan!" exclaimed the gambler. "That disposes of the meddling fool. Here, Sly—we'll drag the carcass inside till we secure the girl."

"Better leave him to me," urged Mendoza.

"You must haste to secure the girl. If I mistake not, she is in this hallway, and may leap to death in the Devil's Mill-Race, as the window is open."

The words drove the blood from Colonel Sandy's face. Catching up the candle, he hurried into the hall, closely followed by Sergeant Sly.

The feeble, flickering light only partially dispelled the darkness, but it disclosed enough to set at rest whatever fears the desperado may have entertained.

Winnie was, indeed, in the hallway, but alone and unconscious.

"The man on the roof, Sly, was not Gold-Dust Dan, but Crazy Mose," averred the gambler, handing the candle to his ally. "With the girl in a swoon, he was unable to retreat the way he came, and our return cut him off."

Colonel Sandy had hit upon the exact truth.

Bearing Winnie back to the couch, the gambler bound her, hand and foot, and then with his allies turned to Crazy Mose.

"W'ot shall we do with ther cuss?" asked Sly.

"He knows too much to be turned loose," Colonel Sandy declared. "He must be silenced."

"He must be silenced at once and forever!" answered Mendoza, with a sinister curl of his thin, red lips. "Come—the dog shows signs of life! Let us fling him into the Devil's Mill-Race."

At that moment the demented miner rolled over and sat up, looking from one to the other of the trio of desperadoes, his eyes blazing with fury.

"Devils!" he grated, vainly searching his belt for a weapon. "Devils! the end is not yet! Know me as I am!"

With a swift motion he tore away and dashed to the floor his flaunting gray locks and beard, revealing the stern, handsome face of the mine-owner, Great Jones!

"Good God! *It is Bartley Wildman!*" ejaculated Sergeant Sly, shrinking as if from a specter.

"Fool!—silence!" gritted Colonel Sandy, his sinewy fingers closing sharply on the arm of the rough. "You have betrayed me!"

"Not so, Rufus Blake!" enunciated the mine-owner. "You have betrayed yourself! I have heard all, and though I die here and now, my death shall not go unavenged!"

"But you are not going to die just yet, Great Jones," Juan Mendoza averred, just the trace of a smile crossing his cruel face. "You represent too much money to be thrown to the fishes, as Crazy Mose would have been. No, no! Living, you will be useful, not only to myself, but also to my friend, the colonel. He has his vengeance to glut; I my pocket to fill!"

"Upon him, boys!"

Like so many ravening beasts of prey, the desperate trio flung themselves upon the helpless mine-owner, and in scarcely more than the time it takes to tell it, he was securely bound and gagged.

"Now for the horses," cried Mendoza, jubilantly. "I will get them out, and do you and your man remain here, colonel, until I return."

Without pausing for a response the Mexican hurried away.

Five—ten minutes passed, and then he noise-

lessly reappeared, bearing a number of blankets in which to envelop the prisoners.

"The camp is quiet, and all is ready," he announced. "Let us get away at once."

A half-hour later the desperate trio were safely in the shadows of the hills, bearing their captives straight to the stronghold of Old Nick's Nine.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNMASKED.

"Oh, Lawd! what a miserable sinner I am!

"How the greed fer gain has engulfed and swallowed me up; yes, even as the whale engulfed and swallowed up Jonah!

"Too late! too late! I see the error of my way!"

"Et's derved tough luck, pardner—sure; but I've allers heer'd say ther path ov ther wicked 's full ov toad-stickers. An' thet 'minds me, Brother Uriah, ye'd better git a mighty quick 'pent on ye, fer ther rockiest pint in yer trail ain't come yit, sure's my name's Injun Rube! Weep, sinner, weep!"

A sneering little laugh followed the words.

The two speakers occupied a tent in the heart of the outlaw encampment.

The first was Johnny Morgan's luckless passenger, the Rev. Uriah Smoothly, of St. Louis. He sat with bowed head near the center of the tent, his hands pinioned at his back, his ankles firmly lashed together. Not a ray of hope lighted his dull, blue eyes, and his round, oily visage, streaked with blood, wore an expression of unutterable woe.

The second was Injun Rube, the outlaw appointed to guard the captive. He was a lank, loose-jointed ruffian, dark almost as a full-blooded red-skin, with a face grim and merciless. He lay at full length on a dirty blanket, his head pillowed in one hand, puffing leisurely at a short, black pipe, his keen black eyes aglow with devilish enjoyment.

The night was well advanced. To one perched amid the lofty crags towering above the basin, faint pencilings of light, heralding the dawn of day, would have been visible low in the distant east.

But sleep had not touched the eyes of captive or guard. The long hours had passed slowly, and in almost unbroken silence. Twice had the Rev. Smoothly broken forth in lamentation, and twice had Injun Rube comforted him in the strain above set forth.

Suddenly the captive raised his head and fixed his listless eyes on the forbidden face of his guard.

"Pardner, do you love gold?" he asked, his voice sinking to a hoarse whisper.

"I loves life better," Injun Rube returned, without taking the pipe from between his teeth. "Ye may be able ter buy ther capt'in, Brother Uriah, but ye can't buy me!"

"When can I see the captain?"

"He may be hyar in two mianutes, maybe not fer two weeks."

"Can I not get word to him? It would be money in his pocket."

"If ye've got money, et'll find et's way inter his pocket soon enough, never fear."

The captive permitted a doleful groan to escape him.

His lips moved, but before he could utter another word the tent-flap was lifted and two men entered. Both were masked and heavily armed.

Injun Rube sprang to his feet.

"Cap'in Nick!" he ejaculated, visibly surprised and alarmed.

"Yes, Rube, your captain, and thanks for the compliment just paid me!" grimly returned the foremost of the intruders.

"We are to strike camp at once. Go with Lieutenant Rivers, here. He will give you orders."

Injun Rube saluted, and followed the second of the intruders from the tent.

The outlaw chief turned to the captive.

"So, my man, you have gold to buy life and liberty?" he added, fixing his eyes on the face of the cowering wretch, a menacing strain creeping into his cold voice.

"I have," was the tremulous reply. "And my poor wife will deliver up our last dollar to purchase my liberty."

"You came up into the Gold Range to buy a mine?"

"To buy or trade one. I was to meet Colonel Moulton at Slocum City to-morrow morning to arrange the matter. Alas! I fear I have missed a golden opportunity!"

The outlaw uttered a laugh.

"Let it be hoped that your loss is our gain,"

he remarked, seating himself to command a clearer view of the captive's face. "I dare say we can come to terms mutually agreeable, and that you'll go home richer in experience if poorer in gold."

"In truth, I am inclined to deal generously with you, the more so that you remind me most forcibly of an old and dear friend."

Captain Nick's tones sunk almost to a whisper, low and purring.

"Indeed!" and for the first time the captive's glance met that of his captor.

"It is true, and you doubtless know him."

"His name?"

"The veteran mountain detective, Bolly Darrit."

The words came from the outlaw's lips with a sibilant hiss. His eyes gleamed with fierce intensity, and his long white fingers opened and closed as if burning to fasten themselves upon the throat of the captive.

The effect of that name upon Uriah Smoothly was even more marked.

His smooth, round face grew purple; the veins stood out on his forehead like whipcords, and his dull blue eyes filled with a lurid gleam.

"That—devil!" he gritted, springing half erect in a sudden access of wrath and dismay, only to fall heavily, sullenly. "The cunning, lying bound! may the devil seize him!"

"Ah, you do know him!" uttered Captain Nick, softly, the flame in his dusky orbs growing brighter and fiercer. "And you hate him, too!"

"Hate him!" with a vicious snarl, a sudden paling of that impurpled visage. "Hate him? as the devil a crucifix! But for him—"

"Spare yourself!" interrupted the chief, coldly, menacingly. "I can not have that absent friend abused, even by one of your cloth! Let it suffice, simply, that you are foes!"

"And, now, another matter. We are about to change quarters, and the ride will be a rough one—one that you can not bear up under in your present condition."

"That wound on your head must be dressed, and you must have food and drink."

Smoothly shook his head.

"The wound is a mere scratch, and will heal of itself," he protested. "But I am ravenously hungry!"

"The wound first," insisted Captain Nick. "It is bad—far worse than you suspect. I'll attend to it myself, and at once."

"But I tell you it amounts to nothing," the captive retorted, hotly. "Let it alone—I am satisfied."

"And I am not."

The next moment the outlaw was upon his knees beside his victim. Slowly, carefully, he ran his finger along the edge of the gaping wound, that strange, fiery glitter in his restless eyes growing brighter and brighter.

Then came an expression of malignant exultation. His long fingers closed in the masses of glossy black hair; a sharp, wrenching jerk, a yell of pain from the captive, and the outlaw chief held aloft an artfully contrived wig!

"You cunning, lying devil! you sought to be-fool me!" grated Captain Nick, springing to his feet, knife in hand. "Better the truth, for I knew you—knew you from the moment I put eyes on you, Bolly Darrit!"

"Have it that way, Old Nick!" retorted the unmasked detective, with a grimace. "I only regret that I have no show to swat you a few!"

A harsh laugh escaped the outlaw.

"Your day for striking a foe is gone!" he cried, kicking viciously at the fallen man. "You're in my hands now—mine! Do you understand what that means? You are to die!—to die by inches!"

"Oh, drive a cork in your face!" the detective retorted. "You take altogether too much for granted. I don't think you know what you're talking about. In fact, I've got a thousand or so that says you'll die before I do!"

"Madman! do you think I forget or forgive? Caramba! that little affair at Tombstone is fresh in my memory yet!"

"And you're wanted there at a rope's end just as bad as ever, Don Jose!" grimly.

"Pah! I'll not talk with you, dog of a detective!" uttered the outlaw. "You tempt me to drive a knife into your heart, and that would spoil my sweet revenge!"

Bolly Darrit chuckled.

"Your heart is weak, your tongue strong, Don Jose!" he exclaimed, with a sneer. "You are an old woman in a man's clothes!"

Captain Nick's dark eyes glowed redly, and again his hand sought his knife; but at that in-

stant the tent flap was lifted and Injun Rube appeared, saying:

"The horses are ready, capt'in, and the men are here to strike ther tent."

"It is well, Rube. Get help and lash this fleshy dog upon the back of a horse. See that he suffers, too; if his bones are broken, so much the better. And, Rube, if he escapes, I'll have your life for his!"

With that, Captain Nick again kicked the prisoner, then quitted the tent.

The guard gazed after him with a peculiar gleam in his black eyes.

"We'll see, my fine lad, we'll see!" he muttered, clinching his hands. "I cry, 'death to our enemies' as loud as ther loudest, but never such a brute as to kill by inches was Injun Rube!"

Then, at a sharp whistle from the guard, Pueblo Peter entered, and the suffering detective was carried out and made fast to the back of a horse.

At the same moment a colossal figure glided stealthily away from the rear of the tent and vanished among the shadows overhanging the eastern side of the basin.

"Ready—forward—march!"

The command rung out crisply on the chill night air. A jingling of spurs, a word here, an oath there, and the cavalcade swept forward at a steady trot.

When day broke, not a trace of the outlaw encampment remained.

CHAPTER IX.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

"THET was a close call, leetle pard—a blamed close call. But fer thet game ole sailor-man an' his pards we'd 'a' bin fine pickin' fer ther kiotes now!"

"Touch an' go, Ozark, with just a little more go than touch!" laughed Gold-Dust Dan, in tones scarcely above a whisper. "Where away?—those human bounds are hot on the trail!"

"Let 'em yelp, Dan!—let 'em yelp! Ther ole sailor-man dropped me a hint, an' we'll act on et. Come."

The two were crouching in the edge of a dense thicket near the lower end of the camp. The River House was in full view, and they could hear Juan Mendoza urging the turbulent crowd to make swift and sure pursuit.

As the old mountain-man spoke, he turned, and closely followed by Dan, skirted the undergrowth, then laid his course toward the Ark.

With noiseless steps the fugitives sped along, keeping in the shadows as far as possible, pausing anon to listen or to fix their course.

In this way, several minutes passed, and they were rapidly nearing the goal, when a low, trilling whistle rose from a cluster of bowlders just ahead.

"Et's ther signal," explained Ozark Oll, halting. "Wait."

A shadowy form emerged from the rocky covert, and came slowly toward the waiting fugitives.

"Et's ther sailor-man," further explained Ozark, in a whisper. "I am ter meet him or his pardner here later on, but ther ruction down ter ther River House bes hurried matters."

At that moment, the man from the bowlders halted before them. As Ozark had intimated, it was Ben Bluff the merchant.

"Howdy, messmates!" he exclaimed, vigorously grasping a hand of each. "I'm 'tarnel glad ye've given them bloody pirates ther slip."

"Reckon we're some tickled, too, pardner," heartily returned Dan. "They gave me a mighty tight squeak, an' ef you hadn't rung in your cold deck on 'em they'd 'a' made their point—sure!"

"They're putty sore, I bet!" chuckled the old merchant. "But come—you boys ain't out ov ther woods, yit. Go down ter my place an' we'll hold a confab 'fore ye leave this hornits' nest."

"Thet's what we're hyer for," Ozark declared.

Ben Bluff forthwith led the way to his store. The two entered at the rear door, and proceeded to the cellar without arousing Monkey, the negro boy.

The consultation was brief. It was arranged at Gold-Dust Dan's suggestion, that Ben Bluff should see Johnny Morgan at the earliest moment possible in regard to sending a relieving party to Murray Weston. It was decided, too, that a posse of picked men should be raised and sent against the stronghold of Old Nick's Nine, Dan promising to have a plainly-marked trail to that rendezvous.

When these matters had been briefly dis-

ed, Ozark and the merchant drew aside for a moment, after which the two fugitives were supplied with food and ammunition, and conducted to the outskirts of the camp.

There, Ben Bluff turned back.

"Now, Dan'l, jest you take their lead," requested Ozark. "I'm not edzactly cl'ar on ther p'int ye want 'er make, but I'm with ye."

"The point is just this," returned the youth. "That king-pin of mountain detectives, Old Bolly Darrit, is in the hands of the outlaws, and must be rescued."

Ozark uttered a low whistle.

"Dan'l, ye s'prise me!" he ejaculated. "I knowed ther ole buccaneer was due in these diggin's, but his bein' took in knocks me all in a heap. How in nater did it happen?"

Gold-Dust Dan seated himself on a boulder, saying:

"To explain that, I must go back a bit. For a year past I have been employed by the stage company as a patrol, being sent from one division to another, as my services were needed, and a few weeks ago I was ordered here. A band of outlaws, nine in number, had repeatedly held up the stage, with heavy loss to the company."

"Before I was sent here, five of the road-agents had been killed outright, and three others severely wounded; yet the gang always appeared nine in number when an attack on the coach was made, and this fact led to the belief that a strong party of cut-throats were encamped in some stronghold of the hills, and I was specially instructed to ferret out their encampment, with a view to wiping them out."

"While thus employed, I became acquainted with Great Jones, and when his safe was robbed he hunted me up and asked me to do a little side work on the case; but I had just made a most important discovery as to the probable location of the outlaw stronghold, and as the clew demanded my whole attention it barrel my pushing the robbery case. After thinking the matter over, I wrote to Darrit, then in St. Louis, requesting him to come up. He answered that he was willing to do so, the more so from the fact that he was even then under agreement to pilot a Miss Moulton from St. Louis to Sand Bar, and perhaps on to Slocum, and that he would start the very day his letter was dated."

"Hoppin' hornits! he never hinted that gal business in his word ter me!" broke in Ozark, indignantly. "I'll tell ye what, Dan'l, me an' thet ole detective fraud's bin pardners off 'n on fer nigh onter twenty years, an' we struck sum patty tough trails. But ther toughest trail we ever did run ag'in' was ther one thet fetched me up byar, an' he sh'ud 'a' bin with me, 'stead ov gallivantin' round over ther kentry, playin' pilot ter lonesome gals. Thet's ther word with ther bark on et, Dan'l, an' I ain't back'ard 'bout speakin' et. Fair woman is a delusion an' a snare; a young man ain't so much ter be blamed fer fallin' an' easy victim, but an ole fool like Bolly Darrit—*waugh!* et makes me tired, boy! Forty-one times, ter my sartin' knowledge, hes thet gay ole pirate landed in hoc from his bein' so over-gallant."

"But go on, Dan'l—don't let me interrupt ye."

"There isn't much more to say," averred the young patrol, smiling. "Bolly and the girl were captured. I played Captain Nick on the outlaws, and got the girl off, but was compelled to leave Bolly in their hands. My object now is to rescue him."

"Wal, Dan'l, et do go ag'in' ther grain ter pull that ole fool out ov ther mire, seein' ther way he got in, but ef ye've got Old Nick's camp down fine, I s'pose et'll be just a circus ter do ther trick."

"If they haven't discovered his identity and killed him," amended Dan.

Ozark's teeth came together with an audible click.

"Satan help 'em, boy, ef they've done thet!" he gritted. "But come—less git on."

"Whar's yer hoss?"

Dan arose and uttered a shrill whistle, and a moment later his well-trained black came trotting up.

"Good!—mine's in that bit ov bresh yender, an' we'll pick her up as we go," said the old mountain-man. "I mostly 'pend on my own laigs, but I reckon this trip ther critter'll come in handy."

"It will until we get within a half-mile of the stronghold," Dan remarked. "After that—well, two shadows could never pass the sentries unchallenged."

"Them sentries are mighty apt ter come ter grief," was the terse response.

At the point indicated, Ozark Oll secured his horse, and then the two went forward as rapidly as possible laying their course to strike the Sand Bar trail a mile short of the barricade.

But the night was intensely dark, and despite their best efforts they were nearly an hour in reaching the road.

Then happened an accident, to cause further delay.

Ozark's horse stumbled, breaking the saddle-girth and hurling his rider head-first to the ground.

The old mountain-man lay like one dead.

In a moment, Gold-Dust Dan was at his side. A hasty examination convinced the youth that, while the old fellow was unconscious, the injury was not serious, and he at once set about the work of resuscitation.

Without water or stimulants at hand, the task proved more difficult than he had suspected it would be, and to add to his annoyance the steady beat of hoofs down the trail warned him that a number of horsemen were approaching.

"It's the party Ben Bluff promised to send out after Murray Weston and the gold," he could not help thinking. "How fortunate is their arrival just at this time!"

Then another thought assailed him:

"What if it is not that party, but a number of outlaws? Ben Bluff must certainly have worked with remarkable celerity to have organized and sent out a force in so short a time."

This second thought appealed strangely to his precaution, and he at once got Ozark and the horses back well into the shadows.

It was well that he did so. Scarcely had he stationed himself at the horses' heads, when the party, five in number, dashed by, and even in the darkness the keen-eyed patrol could see that two of the five were captives, and that one of the captives was a woman!

"Great hoppin' hornit! what can that mean?" ejaculated Dan, as he gazed after the vanishing figure. "There's only one woman in or around Slocum that I know of, and that's Moulton's gal. Can it be as I suspect, or has Miss Winnie again been captured?"

A groan and a sharp gasp of pain interrupted his cogitations. Ozark Oll had risen to a sitting position, and sat with his head buried in his hands.

"What broke loose, boy?" he demanded, after a moment, as he slowly and painfully scrambled to his feet. "Great guns! my cabeza's bu'sted all to pieces!"

"Saddle-girth broke," laconically explained Dan. "Come—rouse yourself while I fix the pesky thing. We must be moving."

Thus adjured, the old mountain-man bestirred himself, vigorously rubbing his head and dancing about until his blood was in a glow.

"Goslin's! boy, thet tumble did me good," he vowed, as he at length prepared to remount. "My—"

"Hark!"

A distant pistol-shot had called that sharp, stern interruption to the lips of Gold-Dust Dan. Just a breath, then a second report broke the silence.

"That comes from near the barricade," asserted Dan, springing into the saddle. "Let's ride up, Ozark. I'm afraid the outlaws have found Murray Weston and finished their red work."

A sharp lope of five minutes carried them to the vicinity of the barricade, where Dan dismounted and went forward on foot.

His worst fears for the safety of Murray Weston were speedily confirmed.

Not a dozen paces had he proceeded, when a low moan in the undergrowth bordering the trail arrested his attention.

"Help! Fer God's sake lend a hand, ef ye're human!"

That feeble cry aroused all that was chivalric in the boy's noble nature. Without a second thought of the peril that might lay before him, he plunged into the bushes, and, guided by the heavy, stertorous breathing of the wounded man, quickly reached his side.

"Water, pard!—water!" moaned the sufferer.

Dan started. Despite the hoarseness, the feebleness, of the voice, he recognized it.

The wounded man was not Murray Weston, but Sergeant Sly!

"Water—water! I am dyin' ov thirst!"

"There's not a drop here. Keep quiet. You must be taken back to camp," Dan returned.

"How came you here?"

"We stopped ter get ther gold—the Greaser, Sandy, an' me, but thet devil ov a sheriff was full ov fight, an' laid me low. An' then my

pards—cuss them fer ther dogs they are!—they deserted me, left me byer fer wolf-bait! Cuss them! ef I kin live till—I—till—"

A rush of blood from the outlaw's mouth checked his utterance, and he fell back, white and limp, almost lifeless.

At a signal from the patrol, Ozark came up, and between them they carried Sly from the thicket and lashed him upright in Dan's saddle.

The action aroused the sorely-wounded man, and a torrent of profanity burst from his bloody lips.

"Save your breath for something better, man," cried Gold-Dust Dan, sternly. "Tell me, where is Deputy Weston?"

"Thar—dern 'im!—jest back ov whar ye got me; but ther gold, ther Greaser devil got ther last dollar!"

With that, Sergeant Sly's head sunk forward. He had fainted.

"Reckon he's done for," observed Ozark, grimly.

"I think not—I hope not," Dan returned. "He is badly hurt, but may live for days. We must get him down to camp and look after him, for I suspect that he's willing to give everything away, even to the identity of the mysterious Captain Nick."

Even while speaking, the patrol had again plunged into the thicket, this time closely followed by Ozark.

A brief search attested the truth of the outlaw's statement.

Deputy Sheriff Weston was found at the spot mentioned. The officer was alive, but unconscious.

It required but a few minutes to lash him to the back of Ozark's horse, and then Dan said:

"Get the pair of them down to Slocum, pard, and squeeze Sly for everything he knows."

"I'll push on an' take a look at the outlaws' den. Get a party out as soon as it's light enough to see. I'll mark the trail so a blind man could read it."

A word from Ozark, and the two parted, the old mountain-man leading the horses toward the camp, Gold-Dust Dan pushing on to the barricade.

Bold, daring, stanch-hearted as he was, the young patrol could not repress a shudder as he paused for a moment beside the overturned coach.

Every feature of that desperate scene so recently enacted there flashed before his mind, with weird distinctness. The wrecked stage, the dead horses, were before him; a palpable evidence of the fearful struggle; the cloak of night shut out the deeper horrors, yet added to the ghastliness of it all, in that it gave full rein to his vivid imagination.

Turning away, Gold-Dust Dan tightened his belt and set forward with long, loping strides—a gait that carried him over the ground rapidly and almost without adding to his fatigue.

As he turned aside to enter the pass into which Johnny Morgan had conducted three of his passengers, Dan paused a moment and hastily cut a quantity of small green twigs.

One of these he dropped at the mouth of the pass, another a dozen paces on, and a third just beyond the cave.

Then on and on he sped, three twigs marking every turn in the course, until the hour of dawn was near at hand.

The outlaw camp was not far distant. Half of that narrow fissure leading to the pass into the basin had been traversed, and a challenge from a sentry might be expected at any moment.

A brief breathing-spell and then Gold-Dust Dan, keenly alert, crept close against the rocky wall and knife in hand glided from point to point, pausing anon to peer forward, ever striving to detect the dark outlines of the sentinels.

But no sulking form met his eye, no hoarse note of challenge greeted his ear. The fissure was grim, silent and deserted.

At the edge of the basin he paused. The darkness was fast giving way to the dim, gray light of early dawn, and a single sweeping glance explained the absence of the sentry.

The encampment had vanished.

"Hoppin' hornits!" exclaimed Dan, vexed beyond measure. "Stead of stealing a march on the thief, the thief has stolen a march on me!"

"Jes' so, Dan'l! Thet very thing do happen sometimes ter the best ov us!"

Revolver in hand, Gold-Dust Dan whirled around. Confronting him was a Colossus in buckskin.

"Big Davy Brinkman!" ejaculated the patrol, in a tone of surprise and delight.

CHAPTER X.

AT THE BASIN—DAN DISAPPEARS.

THE big hunter was a superb specimen of physical development.

He stood six feet and two inches in his moccasins, and was as straight as the lordliest pine in the surrounding hills. His thick neck, and massive shoulders and broad, full chest, his great sinewy arms and hands and ponderous legs, all denoted a wondrous strength.

His head was large and well-formed, his face frank and rugged, and darkened to a nut-brown by long and continuous exposure. Both hair and beard were worn long, and were of a tawny, yellowish-brown shade, in striking contrast to his gleaming black eyes.

He was clothed in buckskin, with a huge bear-skin cap and raw-hide moccasins, and was armed with a repeating rifle, a brace of good revolvers, a long hunting-knife and a small hatchet.

"Yas, lad, et's Big Davy, your biggest an' best friend," he cried, warmly clasping the hand offered by the young patrol. "I reckon ye're some disappointed at findin' ther basin empty, eh?"

"I am, indeed," responded Gold-Dust Dan, his face clouding. "I fully expected to find Old Nick's Mountain League in camp here."

"Wal, they flitted not more nor an hour ago. They kalkilated ther place war gittin' too hot ter hold 'em, an' so levanted 'tween two days. But I reckon they're trail won't be hard ter find."

"I hope not," returned the patrol, dejectedly. "But I'm afraid you don't know Old Nick. He's a regular old fox, an' with an hour's start may keep us winding among these hills for a month."

"Mebbe, mebbe, Dan'l; an' mebbe I don't know ther beast. But come eat a bit, while I tell ye some news, an' then ye kin strike ther trail hot foot, jest es soon es ye want to."

To this proposition, Dan gave ready assent. He was surely in need, not only of food, but of rest.

The Hercules forthwith conducted him to a spring at the upper end of the basin, where they seated themselves and voraciously attacked the contents of Big Davy's provision pouch.

"I s'pose, Dan'l, ye're some at s'prised ter find me hyar," observed the big hunter, when he had partially satisfied the cravings of his stomach.

"I'd not be surprised to find you anywhere," smilingly averred Dan. "You seem to be a regular Wandering Jew."

The Hercules laughed.

"Wal, I hope I ain't," he declared. "But, seriously, Dan'l, I hev wandered some. I r'ally b'lieve I've putt foot on every rod ov mother earth west ov ther Mis'sip'. Le's see, ther last time I run acrost you was in—"

"Flush Deck, Arizona," put in Dan.

"Edactly; an' ef I 'member rightly, we j'ined han's an' putt in some putty good licks fer ther good ov the Territory, eh?"

"We did hit Don Pedro's gang rather hard."

"Rather, an' landed ther Don in the lockup. But I heer'd sence, Dan'l, ther arter we left, ther Greaser guv his jailers ther slip an' made a clean run fer ther hills. He got away but his gang war wiped out, an' that's ther last they've seen ov ther Don 'round them parts."

"Now, lis'en:

"Sence I've bin in these hills, I've bin workin' a prospect on ther quiet. Three days ago, a stranger drapped in on me, an' made himself at home. He played sick, an' he looked sick, an' I treated him white. Yesterday I had ter leave camp ter kill a supply ov meat, an' what does ther orn'y cuss do but scoop in what lee-tle gold I'd found an' levant."

"Soon es I'd disklivered the way things hed gone, I hit his trail an' hung to et till I found he'd j'ined a b'ilin' ov outlaws in camp down toward the relay station. I kalkilated they was layin' in wait fer ther stage, an' ter sp'ile ther trick went down an' putt ther station-boss up ter ther trick."

"Then I went back, ter take a hand myself when the scrimmage opened, but ther gang hed gone—scattered, no two goin' tergether. I picked up a trail, an' et led me roundabout ter this very basin, an' I've bin hangin' 'round ever since."

"Soon es things war quiet last night, I slipped down inter ther camp. I discovered ther thar war over a dozen ov ther outlaws, ther they war well organized, an' hed some prisoners."

"Two ov these war fetched thar while I was in ther camp, one a nice-lookin' gal, t'other Great Jones, ov Slocum City."

"The one they already hed in camp war Bolly Darrit, a detective, an' I kalkilate his days 'll be mighty few."

"But, Dan'l, hyar's ther p'int ther set my blood a-b'ilin': This Capt'in Nick is none other than ther notorious Arizona outlaw, Don Pedro!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Dan, springing to his feet.

"No, et's jest es I tell ye," affirmed the Hercules. "Captain Nick is none other than Don Pedro Santillo, ther bandit."

Dan was silent a moment. Then his face brightened, and he extended his hand, saying:

"Shake, Davy; you are right! I see it all now. Don Pedro, Captain Nick and Juan Mendoza are all one and the same person."

"Thet's et, boy. I met Mendoza two weeks ago, knew him, but c'u'dn't place him."

Dan again seated himself, and the two talked in guarded tones for almost a half-hour.

Then, having decided upon a plan of action, they arose and busied themselves with the few preparations they had to make.

While thus engaged, they were startled by the sudden appearance of a third person, directly between them.

It was Ozark Oil, the old mountain-man.

Had he dropped from the clouds, his coming could hardly have been more silent and mysterious.

"Howdy, boys!" he exclaimed, with an expansive grin at the surprise of the two men. "Whar on 'arth are Captain Nick an' his gang? What ye doin'?"

"Gone," replied Dan. "An' now, you old buccaneer, if you'll tell us how you got here, we'll tell you what we intend to do."

"Thet's easy. I came in ther back way, an' drapped down from that rock jest over yer head."

"An' ther rest ov ther boys?" asked Big Davy. "Dan tells me he's expectin' a passel over from Slocum ter help clean out the outlaws."

"We broke inter two parties," explained Ozark in reply. "Jebu Johnny is fetchin' one up ther lower pass yender, while my crowd, goin' on Serge'nt Sly's say-so, came in by Capt'in Nick's secret path ter Slocum, ter take ther gang in ther rear. My boys are jest out ov sight back hyar, waitin' fer me ter report."

"There is a secret route to Slocum then," Dan exclaimed. "I suspected it, but could never discover it."

"It's a short-cut, Dan'l. By et, ther gold-camp ain't a hafe-hour's ride away."

Ozark's followers were then called up, and a few minutes later Jebu Johnny, sore from his wounds but as game as ever, rode into the basin at the head of his party.

His first act was to spring from his horse and take Gold-Dust Dan by the hand.

"My hot head run away with me last night," he said with smiling earnestness. "Tain't often I back down, but I've got et to do now. I was dead wrong, an' want ye to forgive me, Dan'l."

"Easy said, an' easy done, Johnny," laughed the boy, returning the warm pressure. "You thought you were right, an' that ought to be enough to square the matter."

"Have et ther way, leetle pard. I cain't look over et quite so lightly. But I'm with ye till ther trail ends."

A brief consultation was then held. At its conclusion, Dan, Ozark and Big Davy mounted and rode away on the trail of the Mountain League.

The upper outlet of the basin was even more tortuous than the lower, though considerably shorter, ending in a narrow, brawling mountain stream.

The bottom of the stream was of flinty rock; the banks were almost perpendicular, and rose to a great height.

"Up or down—which?" asked Ozark, as they drew rein.

"That's something it'll take time to decide," Dan returned. "One must go up-stream, one down, an' the third remain here."

"We'll hev ter draw lots ter see who stays back," said Big Davy.

This was done, and, much to his regret, it fell to Dan to take the inactive part.

Just as the first rays of the rising sun gleamed redly on the rippling torrent, the two men urged their horses to the middle of the narrow channel and rode away, Ozark going up-stream, Big Davy down.

Let us follow the Hercules.

He had the sun in his face, and proceeded but slowly, keeping to the middle of the stream and narrowly scouring both banks.

But not a rift through which a man could make his way appeared.

Nearly a mile he proceeded thus, and then a

subdued, sullen roar warned him that he was nearing a cataract.

Then the channel widened, the water grew shallow, and the fall was at hand.

Urging his horse close in to the shore, the Hercules approached the verge and peered over.

The descent was only four feet.

Near the center of the stream, and just below the tumbling torrent, lay the body of a dead horse.

Slipping out of the saddle, Big Davy clambered down and made his way to the dead animal.

Its head had been crushed with an ax, and a brief examination showed that its right fore leg was broken.

"Ther devils! they've never gone down-stream!" gritted the Hercules. "Thet pore critter war brought hyar, maimed an' killed ter throw us off ther track."

"Ef et hed broken its leg jumpin' ther falls, Capt'in Nick'd never 'd left et hyar ter give his course away. No, no! not him, ther cunnin' devil!"

Thoroughly convinced that the outlaws had gone up-stream, Big Davy returned to his horse and hastened back to the rendezvous.

There a fresh surprise awaited him.

Ozark, sitting centaur-like, guarded the mouth of the fissure.

"What luck?" asked the old mountain-man, as the Hercules left the stream.

"No luck," and Big Davy related his experience.

Ozark listened attentively, and then shook his head, saying:

"They sartainly must 'a' jumped ther fall, Davy. Jest around ther angle, up yender, is a cascade a goat c'u'dn't get over, say nothin' ov a hoss. An' thar ain't a break in ther bank on either side."

Big Davy knew not what to say.

He ran his fingers through his long beard and stared hard at the rippling stream.

"Whar's Dan'l?" he asked, presently.

"Gone back ter camp, I s'pose," answered Ozark. "He wasn't hyar when I got back."

The Hercules gazed at his comrade with a startled air.

"By smoky!" he ejaculated. "Thar's som'thin' mysterious in this, pard! 'Tain't 'tall like Dan'l ter go 'way from hyar that-a-way. S'pose ye ride back ter camp an' see ef he's thar."

Ozark rode away. Accompanied by Johnny Morgan, he soon returned, with the announcement that Gold-Dust Dan had not been at the camp.

Mutely, the three men stared at each other.

Not only was the trail lost, but with it the brave young patrol!

After due deliberation, it was decided that Johnny Morgan should return to camp and send a number of scouts into the surrounding hills, while Big Davy and Ozark proceeded downstream in search of the trail.

This programme was faithfully carried out.

Near nightfall, the two bordermen returned, and reported that their quest had been fruitless.

Shortly afterward, the scouts came in from the hills, and as night shut down over the little camp it brought with it a feeling of gloom and foreboding.

CHAPTER XI.

FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

WHAT had become of Gold-Dust Dan?

Immediately after the departure of his two comrades, he had retreated into the fissure a short distance, dismounted and begun a closer examination of the plainly marked trail leading into the water.

While thus engaged, a heavy, grating sound, as of rock rubbing against rock, followed a moment later by a loud splash, arrested his attention, and with a bound he gained the shelter of the rocky wall, where he listened most attentively.

Then came a faint, continuous plashing, as of some one hurriedly crossing from the opposite side of the stream.

And that one could be none other than a member of the outlaw cohort—probably a spy.

With interest thoroughly aroused, the young patrol drew a revolver and with quick, stealthy steps glided toward the brink of the torrent.

His expectations were realized.

A short distance above, crossing from the opposite bank, was a man—a slender, wiry fellow, well armed and carrying in his belt a heavy, short-handled ax.

Securely ensconced behind a jutting angle, Gold-Dust Dan watched the movements of the outlaw most narrowly.

He neared the bank, the fellow turned up again, and a moment later disappeared behind the rocky projection.

Again came that heavy, grating sound, and the plashing ceased.

"He has gone ashore," decided Dan, and, after a moment's reflection, he returned to his horse, mounted and rode into the stream, laying his course against the current.

Leaving his horse to pick the way, the young patrol, cocked revolver in hand, narrowly eyed every nook and cranny of the bank as he advanced, keenly alert for a glimpse of the outlaw spy.

But the fellow was nowhere visible, nor, indeed, a break in the precipitous bank in which he could have obtained a foothold.

At the projection behind which the spy had disappeared, Dan drew rein and subjected his surroundings to a severe scrutiny.

Two things, slight in themselves, but significant, at once attracted his attention.

The first was a peculiarity of the current, which set in toward the rocks, then swirled out, as if met and forced aside by a stronger outpouring under-current.

The second notable point was in the bank itself.

Immediately above the projection behind which the outlaw had vanished, the smooth rock had the appearance of a natural gateway, rising to a height of only eight feet, while just above and below the altitude was much greater.

Moreover, two narrow fissures, some six feet apart, extended from top to bottom of the bank.

His suspicions now thoroughly aroused, Dan urged his horse close against the rock and rose to his feet in the saddle.

An ejaculation escaped him.

Just before him was a narrow pass, winding back into the hills, down which a small brook coursed its way, passing under a natural bridge perhaps fifteen feet in width, and thence out into the main stream.

And the supposed stone, covering and hiding the lower or outer arch of this bridge and forming the apparently solid wall, was nothing more than a huge, carefully-fitted and skillfully-contrived door, made of heavy slabs, covered with iron and carefully sanded!

By any one merely passing up or down the stream, or subjecting the banks to any but a most careful and thorough scrutiny, the cunning arrangement would never have been discovered.

But the door projected a few inches above the top of the bridge, and Dan read the secret at a glance.

A brief examination convinced him that the door could be opened only from the inside, and with a word to his horse, he scrambled hastily upon the bridge, and, with due precautions against an ambush, made his way down into the pass.

Plunging into the gloomy, reeking tunnel, he slipped back the strong bolts, and with a steady, powerful pull swung the door half-open, the movement of the huge piece being accompanied with that peculiar, grating, rasping sound which had led to his detection of the outlaw spy.

A glance up and down the stream failed to discover either Ozark or Big Davy.

"Well, Prince, we'll try it alone," he muttered, leading the animal inside the tunnel. "Fortunately, we know the way out if it becomes too warm for us."

Then he carefully closed and secured the door, mounted, and rode slowly up the pass.

As he proceeded, the trail of the outlaws became plainly visible, and he pressed onward with the utmost caution.

The very nature of his surroundings impressed him with the belief that Captain Nick's new quarters were not far distant, and he decided to seek a secure covert for his horse, and proceed afoot.

Fortunately, an intersecting fissure, whose flinty bottom defied an impress of the iron-shod hoofs, soon appeared, and into this Dan made his way.

A hundred yards above the main pass, this branch opened into a small circular chamber in the heart of the great rocks, and here the youth decided to leave the horse.

Dismounting, he carefully examined the magazine of his rifle, assured himself that his revolvers were in perfect order, and then, with a parting word to Prince, turned away.

The most perilous part of his during mission now lay before him: to learn the exact location of the outlaw den, its entrance, and the position of the sentries.

That discovery meant death, Gold-Dust Dan well knew; he had incurred the bitter enmity of

the Mountain League, and if taken now his end would be swift and sure.

But duty called him on, and without a second thought of his awful peril, the bold lad retraced his steps to the main pass, where he sought a break in the precipitous walls and made his way up among the lofty, barren crags.

From the moment he quitted the pass, he proceeded with the greatest caution, in exposed places drawing himself forward inch by inch flat upon his face: every rock, boulder or shrub that promised cover, was made to serve its part.

One—two—three hours passed, and he had traversed scarcely a mile, so slow and laborious had been his progress. Then, weak, trembling, almost exhausted and streaming with perspiration, he dropped at full length upon a narrow ledge extending around three sides of the spur.

"Hornits! but this is work!" he mused, wiping his flushed brow. "I ought to be able to see 'most everything going on in a mighty good stretch of country, though, from this peak, and if it pans out as well as I suspect it will, I'll have no cause to complain."

"I wonder what Ozark and Davy have found? Nothing but water, I'll bet!"

For the better part of an hour he remained flat on his back, his mind busy with the task before him. Then he sat up and carefully scanned every visible foot of the territory through which he had made his way.

The natural bridge could be seen, nearly a mile distant, and as his sweeping, searching gaze rested on it a moment a low murmur of surprise broke from his lips.

The tunnel beneath the bridge was nearly full of water!

"The cunning devils!" he muttered, his hands clinching in spite of himself. "I must find another way out, or leave Prince behind. They must have a dam and a floodgate somewhere above."

But there was nothing to indicate that his presence had been discovered, and with a breath of satisfaction he rose to his feet.

At the same moment, light, shuffling footsteps warned him that he was not alone on the ledge, and he sprang behind a friendly angle in the solid wall at his back.

But the move was futile. The next instant he was confronted by a burly, bearded, brutal-looking man, whose very face stamped him as an outlaw.

To say that the fellow was surprised expresses it mildly.

"Hallo! hallo! who are you? What are you doin' hyar?" he demanded, in a blustering tone.

Dan uttered not a word, but sprang straight at his throat, clubbed revolver in hand.

But the ruffian was not to be disposed of so easily.

He skillfully turned aside the hand outstretched to grasp his throat, parried the descending blow, and the next instant grappled Dan.

Locked in a deadly embrace, the two reeled to and fro at the very verge of the ledge. Each knew that his life was at stake, and put forth his best efforts.

But Dan had long practiced the arts of the wrestler, and though overmatched in strength felt confident he would win the bout.

Skillfully drawing his antagonist away from the brink, he centered all his powers in a supreme effort, and the struggle was ended.

That effort was the famous "cross-buttock." The outlaw fell heavily, his head striking the rocks with a stunning force, then lurched forward and disappeared over the verge.

Not a sound, not a groan escaped him.

Dan shuddered. He crept to the edge of the terrace and looked down. The one glance was enough. Sick at heart, he drew away from the brink, secured his revolver and prepared to leave the fatal spot.

Cautiously he made his way to the opposite side of the spur, the point of greatest advantage, and with the aid of a field-glass set himself to locate, if possible, the position occupied by the Mountain League.

But the closest scrutiny failed to detect a sign of life in all that wild, desolate waste.

He then turned his glass on the basin, the late stronghold of the outlaws, nearly a mile away and to his right.

There, he could see the party from Slocum City in camp; and as he swept the environments of the basin the scouts sent out one by one became visible.

Next he bent his gaze upon the natural bridge, and slowly foot by foot, searched out each nook and cranny of the narrow pass leading therefrom.

An interjection escaped him.

The pass wore away to the right, growing

more and more indistinct and irregular in outline, and then suddenly ended when it seemed almost to pierce the basin wall!

"A cunning trick! a cunning trick!" exclaimed Dan, triumphantly, as he closed and pocketed the glass. "But your secret is out, if all is as I suspect, my foxy captain!"

With the same caution and deliberation that had characterized his movement from the first, the young patrol quitted the ledge and retraced his steps to the fissure.

Here a fresh difficulty presented itself.

The opening of the floodgate above had so swollen the little stream that to follow the channel he would be compelled to wade waist-deep in the icy current.

Back to the top of the rift he clambered, then resolutely set forward, keeping as close to the verge as possible, that naught of importance below might escape him.

This course greatly retarded his progress, as frequent *detours* became necessary, while to avoid the risk of detection he was compelled to cross every open barren space flat on his stomach.

But his indomitable will urged him on, and just as the purple of twilight was giving way to the shadows of night, he reached the head of the fissure.

Not a sound, save the soft, musical murmur of the water as it issued from the black, cavernous opening fifty feet below, broke the drowsy silence. All was quiet and peaceful, and one less acute than the young patrol might readily have believed himself alone in that vast solitude.

Flat on his back Dan extended himself, to rest his weary, aching body; for that day's work, reader, had been one to rack the frame of a seasoned, toughened mountain-man.

An hour or more he lay thus, until the last ray of light had faded from the western sky, then rose and prepared to descend the side of the fissure.

He had marked his course while the twilight lasted, and now, with his rifle strapped to his back, swung himself over the verge and lightly dropped to a bench or ledge some ten feet below, whence a zigzag path led down to the abysmal gloom shrouding the end of the pass.

Slowly, feeling his way inch by inch, crept the youth, as noiselessly as a cat, until the bottom was reached, where he paused beside the stream, lay down and pressed his ear to the earth.

The slow, measured tread of a sentry pacing to and fro somewhere within the cavernous opening just ahead confirmed every suspicion he had formed.

The outlaw den was at hand—he stood at its very threshold!

In a moment, he was within the rocky walls, now stealing forward with stealthy steps, again pausing close against the cold stones with head bent to catch the sentry's movements.

On and on, now with knife in hand, until he could hear the breath of the outlaw guard come and go; a moment of suspense intense and almost endurable, and then—he was across the line!

Forward with quick, light steps he glided, keeping his right hand in contact with the wall that he might not lose his bearings. A hundred—two hundred feet thus, then the course bent abruptly to his right, and a light breeze swept his face.

"A branching passage, leading to the outer air," was the thought that instantly suggested itself, and he decided to seek the opening.

Again he moved forward; but not a dozen paces had he gone when he ran directly against a sentry leaning against the wall, half asleep!

"Look out! w'ot ther—"

Not another syllable did the doomed outlaw utter. Swift as the lightning's dash, Dan's hand grasped his throat; a terrific blow from the butt of a clubbed revolver, and the fellow slipped down, limp and lifeless.

"I do hope I haven't killed you, though too many lives are at stake to be over-scrupulous on that point," muttered the youth, as he rolled the body close against the wall.

A moment of listening convinced him that the brief struggle had not alarmed the other denizens of the cave, and he hurried to the end of the passage.

A heavy growth of vines marked the opening, and parting these Dan looked out.

Dark as it was, he recognized the basin. The murmur of subdued voices apprised him that the camp of his friends was not many feet distant, and for a moment he was tempted to make his presence known.

"No, no," he decided, turning back. "I had

better discover every point possible, so that when the attack is made Captain Nick may be given no chance in his devilish wrath to destroy the prisoners."

And that decision saved at least one life.

Back to the main passage hurried Dan, and then with the wall to guide him, plunged yet deeper into the cavern.

Presently a ray of light caught his eye, and a moment later he was peering into a small, dry sub-chamber opening off the passage.

Seated on bowlders, a sort of rude table between them supporting a lantern and a bottle of liquor, were Juan Mendoza and Colonel Sandy Moulton, engaged in close conversation.

CHAPTER XII. REVELATIONS.

"PERDITION seize upon the sharp-nosed hounds! If they're going into camp there, and intend to make the basin the base of their hunt, we may as well march out and show fight first as last!"

A torrent of fierce oaths and bitter invectives followed the words, and Juan Mendoza glared savagely through the net-work of vines at the unsuspecting party under Johnny Morgan, at that moment going into camp.

"Easy, Juan—easy!" cautioned Colonel Moulton, in softest accents, as he stood close beside the irate Mexican. "They may hear you, and you should remember that gentlemen in our peculiar circumstances, however good the will to fight, it is better to run away and fight another day!"

"Oh, curse your moralizing!" was the gruff response. "I intend neither to fight nor to run away. But the truth is, we're virtually over a mine that may explode at any moment. Let this passage be discovered, and our ruin is assured."

"But if due care is exercised, it will not be discovered," urged Moulton. "That party will not remain in camp long. Set a guard here, and warn the men that a tone above a whisper will be punished with death."

Mendoza's lip curled scornfully.

"Death!" he sneered. "Think you the restless, turbulent dogs fear death? Faith! they've learned a new trick if they do!"

"But come! If the net is spread, our feet must not enter its meshes. We will set the guard and caution the men, and then events must shape themselves."

Mendoza was as good as his word. A scout was sent down the pass, sentinels were put on at various points, the captives were secured beyond the remotest chance of escape, and the men cautioned to observe the strictest silence.

These precautions taken, the outlaw felt more at ease.

"And now, my dear colonel, let us pay our respects to the whisky, and then to sleep," he suggested, when at last the two found themselves alone in one of the small chambers opening off the passage. "In two days I have not closed my eyes, and the drowsy god is pressing his claims."

"I, too, am played out," yawned Moulton, pouring himself a liberal drink. "Here's to our final success, Juan."

"And the destruction of our foes, root and branch."

The glasses were drained, and then, turning the light low, the two desperadoes stretched themselves on the cold stones, using their saddles as pillows.

"Say your prayers with extra unction, colonel, as the chances are you'll awake in the next world!" sneered the Mexican, as he closed his eyes.

"And you, Juan—forget not your patron, the devil."

With that, the two slept.

Hour after hour passed, and the shadows of evening were falling over the basin without when Mendoza awoke and sprung to his feet.

Beads of perspiration, cold and deadly, stood upon his forehead, and his black eyes were filled with an expression of terror and despair.

"Has that devil escaped? Have the blood-hounds closed in upon us? Or is it all a dream?" he gasped, wildly, incoherently. "*Madre Dios!* but I must see, or die!"

With nervous haste he quitted the chamber and sped along the passage, pausing not until he stood beside the captured detective, Bolly Darrit.

"Aha! you are here yet!" he cried, with a long breath of relief. "I dreamed that you had run away!"

"Not yet, Don Jose," was the cool reply. "But, given time, I'll escape to fit a halter on your scraggy neck—mind that!"

The Mexican laughed wildly.

"Bark while you may, dog!" he cried, spurning the detective with his foot. "Your mangy carcass will never leave this hole!"

Then, with a look at the other captives, and a few words to the guard, the outlaw departed.

Mendoza's next move was to visit the men.

He found them alert and wakeful, and saw that more than one of the wild, dark faces wore a sullen frown.

His teeth came together with a click, but he repressed his anger.

"Has the scout come in yet?" he asked.

A negative answer was given.

"And Devil Dan?"

"Hyar, boss, sence mornin'," and the wiry little rascal whom Gold-Dust Dan had detected in the act of crossing the stream and entering the secret gate, stepped forward. "I took ter boss down ter ther falls, boss, an' left et 'cordin' ter orders. Comin' back, I was obliged ter hole, es scouts from ther party outside war in ther pass; but I got in all right."

"And without being seen?"

"Nary a glimpse they got ov me, boss!"

"That is good," and Mendoza nodded his approbation. "And now, boys, turn in and sleep till midnight, leaving a guard. It is likely that before morning dawns we'll turn bound and hunt the hunters."

As if by magic, the frowns and scowls cleared away.

"That suits me—you bet!" ejaculated a gaunt, raw-boned ruffian.

"Hyar, too!"

"An' me!"

And so ran the murmur of approval from man to man. At one stroke Mendoza had regained his waning prestige. With those turbulent spirits, anything was preferable to being "boled up" in that dismal den.

Returning to the chamber where he had spent the day, the Mexican awakened Moulton.

"Come!" he cried, rudely shaking the colonel by the shoulder. "Arouse—there is work before us!"

The gambler sprang to his feet with glaring eyes.

"What! has Darrit escaped? Are the hounds upon us?" he demanded, hoarsely. "God! I dreamed we had reached the end!"

Mendoza's face grew white and haggard. For a moment he knew not what to say.

What meant this strange co-incidence of dreams and of waking thoughts?

Was it but the result of their gloomy surroundings?

Or was it a forerunner of impending doom?

The Mexican, ever superstitious, inclined to the latter belief.

With trembling hands, he helped himself to a brimming glass of whisky. The powerful liquor rallied him some and sent the blood back to his face.

"Drink!" he ordered, pushing bottle and glass toward Moulton. "Fool! burn those dismal cobwebs of fancy from your brain!"

"I drink to drown conscience," retorted the colonel, faintly. "I feel that we are doomed men, Juan!"

Mendoza uttered an oath, and filled and tossed off another glass of the liquor.

Colonel Moulton followed his example, and then the two seated themselves at the table.

Of their conversation, little if any, need be repeated here. Suffice it, that it was decided to dispose of Detective Darrit and Bartley Wildman—"Great Jones"—at once, and to attack and disperse Johnny Morgan's party at midnight, and then flee from the Territory.

As they talked, they drank, and when at length they arose from the rude table both were ready for any deed of evil.

Straight to that apartment of the cavern in which the captives were kept they proceeded, Mendoza in the lead, lantern in hand.

The guards had changed, and Injun Rube was on duty.

At the word from Mendoza, the ruffian conducted Winnie Moulton into an adjoining chamber.

Bolly Darrit and Bartley Wildman eyed the evil pair intently.

"Gentlemen, we have come to bid you farewell," announced Mendoza, sardonically. "It is our belief that you are about to take your departure from this world, and we desire to wish you *bon voyage*."

"In other words, before slaying us you wish to torture us," suggested Wildman, with the utmost composure.

"Oh, you shouldn't express the idea so bluntly, Captain Wildman!" Moulton protested, with mock seriousness. "For my own part, I simply

wish, before you go hence, to talk over old days when you and I were young.

"If you remember, we were rivals almost from the cradle, and many were the jousts we had in those boyhood days of long ago."

"And you were the lucky dog, too, captain! There was never a prize between us but you carried it off. And so it went on from boyhood to manhood, when came the crowning stroke—the stroke that ruined both our lives. You remember it, captain?"

Wildman made no reply; but there was a dire light in his dark eyes.

"The memory is doubtless a painful one," chuckled Moulton, moving forward and seating himself directly beside the captive, that he might watch his face the more closely. "We both loved Margaret Bluffton, and you won her."

"I must admit that your triumph pained me sorely. In fact, I swore revenge. Secretly, I worked and planned night and day to accomplish your overthrow, and—Do you remember how the blow fell, captain?"

But not a word came from the captive. His teeth clicked slightly, that fierce glow in his eyes deepened.

The gambler uttered a tantalizing little laugh, and then continued:

"You were away on the field of battle when your wife and baby girl disappeared—Margaret's father on the blue ocean, under the flag of his country. So precious time was lost and the trail never found."

"Margaret died, in less than a year, of a broken heart, and fills an unknown grave. But the little Viola—her mother in miniature—lived, and yet lives. You have seen her," and the gambler nodded toward the adjoining chamber. "Until less than a month ago she looked upon me as her father, and her affection was none the less sweet to me that it should have been given to you."

"When my accomplice and faithful ally for many years, Barbara Garot, whose younger brother you had caused to be shot as a spy—when this faithful ally lay down to die, she confessed all, and that confession was given to Viola, now Winnie, and she hurried hither to demand the truth."

"In that, the girl made a mistake. She should have remained within the pale of civilization and intrusted her mission to an agent—say Bolly Darrit there!"

"But I am not finding fault. Indeed, I am well pleased. Barbara made known more than I would have told, perhaps; but after all, Winnie is a sensible creature, and can overlook much in her prospective husband."

"Ah, captain, it does my heart good to talk over bygones with a departing friend. And we have been friends! For years, you have been ever near me, drawn on by some subtle impulse, seeking the playmate of other days; but I had so changed that you knew me not when we chanced to meet."

"I watched your career with interest most intense. I saw your proud spirit humbled to the dust, saw you become an outlaw—a fugitive with a price on your head, and all for a crime of which you were guiltless—a crime which I, Rufus Blake, had committed, for mine was the hand that struck out the life of Rancher Alveda!"

"And mine was the hand that dealt you blow after blow, again and again wrestling fortune away when just within your grasp! Mine was the hand that rifled your safe; mine the hand that brought you here! Mine is the hand that shall drink your life, and mine is the hand that shall shape your daughter's fate!"

The low, purring, malignant tones ceased. With knife raised aloft, the desperado bent forward, peering sharply at the face of his tortured victim.

And he saw—what? Out of that set, marble-like visage gleamed a pair of orbs either more or less than human, so cold, so deadly, was their piercing, baleful glare—a glare that palsied his arm and enchaind his very soul!

A deathly chill struck his heart, a horrible fancy seized his brain. Bartley Wildman was a corpse, and through his sightless orbs shone the eager, relentless fire of hell!

Vainly the wretch struggled to break, to throw off, that dread spell. He strove to shriek aloud, and a mere babbling, broken cry came from his parched lips. Then troops of gibing, mocking devils beset him, and he started to his feet, brandishing the knife, wildly waving them off, gasping in harsh, dry accents scarcely above a whisper:

"Back! back, I say! For the love of heaven, touch me not! Back! Away!"

Step by step he retreated, shivering, trembling, cowering, until his back was against the

His terrified glance shifted from side to side, as if seeking a break in the invisible ranks. A low, wailing cry burst from his lips. He turned the point of his knife over his heart, and with a swift stroke drove the steel home!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FACE IN THE VINES.

LET us return to the camp in the basin. Nearly all felt that the expedition had been a failure, and a few of the more ignorant and superstitious were firmly convinced that the road-agent band were in league with Satan himself.

"Et's a speerit outfit, f'm fu'st ter last," gravely averred a grizzled veteran from the Great Jones Mine. "They was nine on 'em when they fu'st appeared, an' they's nine yit. Ef they hed a fight an' some was killed, es I've heer'd say, nobody ev'ry found ther bodies, an' they'd turn up naixt time 'ith nine full saddles. Lads, thet hain't ther way ov human flesh!"

"But see hyar, Uncle Eph!" expostulated Johnny Morgan. "Thar's no such things as spirits. They was always nine, shore enough, but they hed a gang hyar ter fill out the regular number ov saddles afore ev'ry raid, an' thet's all there was ov et. An' fer ther dead, they 'most likely sent back and burried them, jest as they did last night."

"Did, eh?" sneered the veteran. "An' I s'pose hossflesh an' human flesh kin melt away—vanish right afore our eyes almost—jest es thet gang did this mornin', eh?"

"Thar was some trick about that," Johnny Morgan declared. "An' I believe Gold-Dust Dan has discovered thet trick an' is holin' ther derved varmints ag'in."

"More likely they gobbled ther little imp right up," surlily retorted the veteran, loading and lighting his pipe.

At that moment Ozark Oil arose, and with a word to the sentry glided away from the camp.

Straight across the basin went the old mountain-man until he reached the eastern wall, where he halted and uttered a low, bird-like whistle.

In a moment, Big Davy, the hunter, was at his side.

"Any news?" asked Ozark, in a tone just audible.

"A bit, but not from ther quarter we expected," was the equally cautious reply. "I'm glad ye kem out. Thar's a cave ov some sort in this hill, an' thar's some one in et. I want you ter stay right hyar till I investigate."

"Sart'in. But whar is this cave?"

"Just under thet clump ov vines ag'in ther rocks. I thor't I heer'd a voice in thar, an' crept up; but when I got thar, not a sound c'u'd I hear. I kept still, an' by an' by ther vines parted an' a white, ghostly face looked out, then vanished."

"A blamed spy, I'll bet!" exclaimed Ozark.

"More'n likely," Big Davy assented. "An' ef et was, more'n likely thet cave leads right ter Capt'in Nick's new den. Any way, I'll see."

The Hercules moved away, and a moment later disappeared. He had parted the vines and entered the passage.

The minutes passed slowly, until a quarter of an hour was gone. Ozark moved nearer the vines, half determined to enter and investigate on his own hook.

At that juncture, however, the leafy covert was swept aside and a man staggered forth into the cool night air.

"My God! my head—my head! It's split wide open, and I am dyin'!"

As the fellow gasped the words, he raised his hand to his head, reeled, and would have fallen but for the support Ozark hastened to give.

"Ye seem ter be pretty bad hurted, pard," ventured the mountain-man.

"Hurted?—it's killed I am! Oh, my head! my head! et's split wide open!"

For a moment Ozark was undecided what to do. He believed the fellow was really seriously hurt, and that he was a member of Old Nick's Nine whom Big Davy had encountered within the cavern, and subjected to severe punishment.

To take him over to the camp would likely cause a commotion very undesirable just at that time, but it seemed the best thing he could do, and he started, partly leading, partly carrying the moaning ruffian.

On reaching the sentry, Ozark sent ahead for Johnny Morgan, and through him prepared the men in camp to receive the wounded outlaw without any undue excitement.

It was a precaution well taken. An incautious move, just then, might have changed the whole course of events.

Placing the outlaw on the ground, Ozark pushed the men back and demanded:

"Pard, who are you?"

"Oh, I'm Brother Ike," was the meaning reply.

"An' yer head—who split it?"

"Capt'in Nick. He caught me asleep on guard."

"Whar—in ther cave?"

"In ther cave."

"He is in camp thar now?"

"Yes, in camp."

Ozark knelt and slowly ran his hand over the fellow's head. To his intense surprise, the outlaw's hurt was but a trifling one—a bruise just above the left ear.

"Reckon he ain't on the side fer kingdom come—not jist yit!" he remarked, dryly, as he arose.

"Better bind an' gag 'im, John. His hoss sense is comin' back, an' he may play ther mischief."

The suggestion was a wise one, and the action outlined was at once taken. With the full return of consciousness, the outlaw—the victim of Gold-Dust Dan's revolver-butt, by the way—found himself not only unable to speak, but utterly powerless to stir hand or foot.

Ozark and Jehu Johnny then stepped aside, and as a result of their brief consultation word was passed from man to man to prepare for immediate action.

This was precisely the word the brave fellows had been waiting to hear since sunrise. They had but little to do in the way of preparation, and in a moment announced themselves ready.

A man was detailed to remain with the captive, and then, with Ozark and Jehu Johnny in the lead, the party moved slowly toward the vine-covered entrance to the cavern.

Ozark led the way, and one by one the men filed into the passage. Then the party halted, while the old mountain-man went ahead to reconnoiter.

Just as he reached the main passage, a huge form loomed up before him out of the darkness.

"That you, Davy?"

"Yes, Ozark, et's old Davy," was the quick reply. "Git ther boys in hyar, right away. This is Old Nick's Den, sure enough!"

"Ther boys are right at my back, Davy."

"Good! Step light an' come on. Thar's a hot time a-brewin' up hyar!"

CHAPTER XIV.

GOLD-DUST DAN VS. CAPTAIN NICK.

"THE fool has turned madman and slain himself!" exclaimed Mendoza, as Colonel Moulton fell inertly to the floor. "I have foreseen the act for many a day."

"I should say it's the only good act he's been guilty of, to my knowledge," observed Bolly Darrit, dryly. "From his own words, I doubt if there was a single white spot in his whole sin-steeped carcass."

"Speak not evil of the dead, thou dog!" Mendoza cried, with a flourish. "The colonel was a man among men, till his reason tottered and gave way. He never betrayed a friend nor forgave a foe."

Then a shadow crossed the dark face of the Mexican and he strode back and forth across the room.

Suddenly he paused beside the detective.

"Dog of a man-hunter, what brought you into these hills?" he hissed, passionately. "Speak the truth or you shall die with the lie on your lips!"

Darrit laughed.

"Really, Don Jose, I fear you are following in the footsteps of your friend, there," he replied. "But there is now no reason why I should seek to hide the truth."

"I came to seek the murderer of Rancher Alveda."

"A cunning lie!" cried Mendoza, dropping upon his knees beside the helpless detective. "You came to hound me!"

Again the detective laughed. If he saw his peril, he gave no sign.

"Have it your way, Don Jose," was his cool retort. "If the truth don't please you, make it a lie."

The Mexican flourished his knife.

"I want no lie!" he cried, fiercely. "You followed me here, Bolly Darrit, and you came not alone. Where is your mate? Where is the covert that hides him? Speak!"

"Seek and find!" snapped Darrit, his blue eyes at last kindling with the fires of anger.

"Seek him as he seeks you, you murderous thief!—if you can control your heels!"

"I am no coward to run away!" exclaimed

Mendoza, vauntingly. "And I shall find your mate—find him and slay him as mercilessly as I struck you down. You have been a shrewd man, Bolly Darrit, a shrewd man and a dangerous foe; but your wit failed before mine, or you would never have permitted yourself to be taken captive to the stronghold of Captain Nick."

"And so you are that devil, too," muttered Darrit, speaking thus to veil the real cause of the startled look that flashed over his face. "You—you do yourself proud, Greaser!"

"Ay! I have been Captain Nick, as I was Don Jose Amedia, Don Pedro Santillo, Juan Mendoza, et al," continued the Mexican with a boastful smile. "I was born with the claws of a panther and the cunning of a fox. The prison is not built that will hold me, and I have grown wealthy in outlawry."

"To-night Captain Nick disappears forever, and the head of one of the oldest and noblest families in Mexico reappears."

"But you, dog of a detective, you are doomed. You have but one chance for life: tell me where hides this mate of yours, and when we go hence you shall remain, bound it is true, but free of bodily harm."

Darrit's lip curled scornfully.

"A generous consideration, truly!" he sneered. "Remain, bound and helpless, to die by inches, or become the prey of the ravening brutes of the mountains!"

"It is a chance for life," urged Mendoza.

The detective looked straight into the dark face above him, and seemed to reflect.

"How do I know you will do this?" he asked, suddenly.

"You have my word," was the proud reply.

"As good as gold, that," mockingly. "No, Don Jose, you and I cannot come to terms. I could not tell you where to find my mate, and I would not if I could. Deliver him into your merciless hands! Never!"

A scream of rage rung from the lips of the baffled outlaw, and he flung himself directly upon the prostrate detective; his knees pressing sharply on the full round chest, one hand forcing the closely cropped head back and exposing the throat, he glared down into that cold white face with an expression of deadly malignity; then his knife slowly descended until the keen edge rested directly across the jugular vein.

Bartley Wildman uttered a cry of horror and turned his head away.

Slowly, relentlessly, the knife pressed through the skin and entered the flesh.

But Bolly Darrit's iron nerve did not waver. Not a tremor shook him, and he met the burning gaze of his foe as calmly, as unflinchingly as ever.

"Speak!" hoarsely commanded the latter, again raising the knife.

A firm hand grasped his uplifted arm and with a quick wrench sent the knife spinning across the cave.

With an agile spring, Mendoza gained his feet and faced about, a malediction on his lips.

Gold-Dust Dan confronted him.

The look of terror that had seized upon the Mexican's dark face gave way to an expression of fierce delight, and clapping his hands he cried:

"Rube! Rube! this way, quick!"

Injun Rube promptly appeared in the archway connecting the two apartments.

"Seize the young devil!" ordered Mendoza, pointing to Dan.

The outlaw guard drew a revolver and leveled it—not at the young patrol, but at Mendoza himself!

"What do you mean, you dog?" gritted the Mexican, his face turning a yellowish white.

"I mean, simply, that your game is up, Captain Nick!" was the stern response.

"Know ye, too, that I am the man you so urgently wished to find—Old Dan Rackhoss, Bolly Darrit's mate!"

The outlaw recoiled with a snarl of rage and despair, and then a stentorian shout rang from his lips.

But the alarm-call was sounded too late.

The sharp report of a revolver stung through the outer cavern. Then came the tramping of many feet over the rough stones, wild yells, and a murderous volley.

Speechless with terror, Juan Mendoza turned to flee, but Gold-Dust Dan barred the way, and in another minute the outlaw chief was a helpless and a hopeless prisoner.

Never again would Old Nick's Nine terrorize the Montana camps and trails.

Taken completely by surprise, they were able to make but a faint resistance, and those who survived that first volley fired by the men from Slocum City were quickly overpowered and

made prisoners. Of all the evil band, but one escaped—the guard in the lower pass.

Gold-Dust Dan appeared in the outer cavern just as the brief conflict ended, and was greeted almost as one risen from the dead. Big Davy, in particular, was overjoyed that the lad was yet among the living, giving him a bear-like hug accompanied with three cheers at the top of his powerful voice.

Then came Bartley Wildman, as Great Jones, leading his daughter, and close behind the happy pair were old Bolly Darrit and Dan Rackhoss—"Injun Rube." Between them the two veteran detectives dragged Captain Nick.

Winnie was made as comfortable as possible, pending the return to the gold-camp, and then explanations were declared in order.

Great was the surprise of the miners when the full truth was made known.

Gold-Dust Dan had all along been aware of the presence of Old Dan Rackhoss among the outlaws, in fact, had learned from him the various disguises and signals used by Captain Nick as well as the location of the camp in the basin.

At no time during his captivity until that last moment had Bolly Darrit been in peril of his life. Indeed, he might have escaped almost at will, as Old Dan had been his guard from first to last save a few hours during the day.

The confession of Colonel Moulton cleared away all doubts as to the relationship existing between Bartley Wildman and Winnie, and at the same time established the mine-owner's innocence of the murder of Rancher Alveda.

The dead outlaws were carried to the basin and buried, and a thorough search of the cavern was made.

While this work was going on, Gold-Dust Dan, Big Davy, Ozark and Dan Rackhoss traced the stream to its source—a beautiful little lake beyond the cove, and there discovered an ingeniously contrived floodgate.

Shutting off the water, they returned, and Dan accompanied by Big Davy, hurried down the pass and secured his horse, Prince.

On their return, they found that a treasure-chamber containing a vast amount of booty had been discovered, among which was the gold taken from the office of the Great Jones Mine, as well as that which had so nearly cost Murray Weston his life. Then back to Slocum City, by way of Captain Nick's secret path, went the victorious party.

With the single exception of Captain Nick, or Juan Mendoza, the captured road-agents were tried and executed by the miners of Slocum City.

The chief met a like fate less than a month later at Tombstone, Arizona, where he was taken by the three border detectives, Darrit, Ozark and Rackhoss.

The River House was razed to the ground, and evidences of many fearful crimes were brought to light.

Sergeant Sly's wounds were fatal. Before he died, he sent for Big Davy and returned the gold that had been taken from the camp of the big hunter.

The wounds of the deputy sheriff, Murray Weston, proved obstinate, but finally healed, and he and Jehu Johnny made many a run together over the Sand Bar trail.

To Winnie's intense delight, she found in Ben Bluff her grandfather, Benjamin Bluffton.

Disposing of the Great Jones Mine, Bartley Wildman, with his daughter and the old sailor, went to San Francisco, where they made their home, far from the scenes of their early trials and troubles.

And Gold-dust Dan?

His work on the Sand Bar trail was done.

A week of rest, and then one fine morning he mounted Prince and accompanied by Big Davy rode away, going none knew where.

THE END.

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